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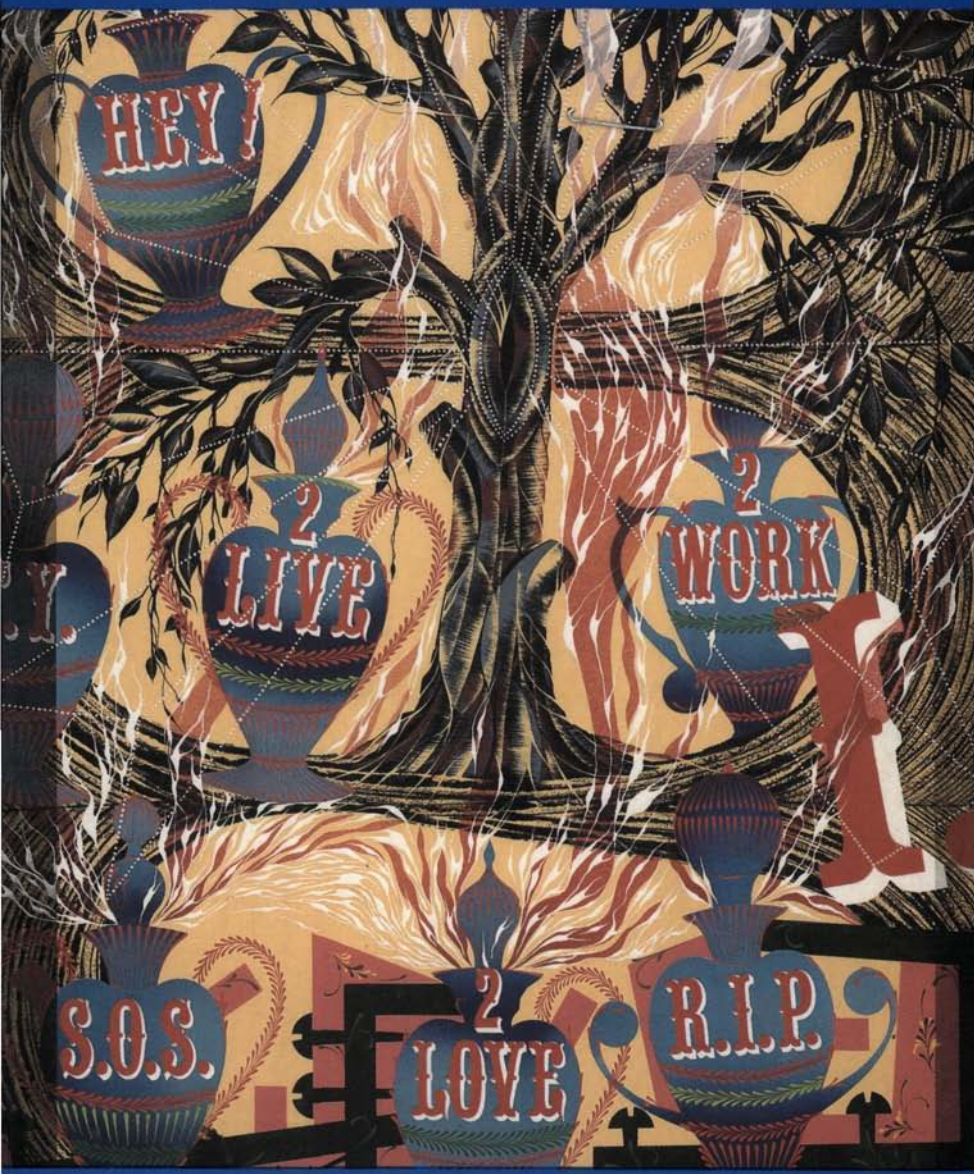

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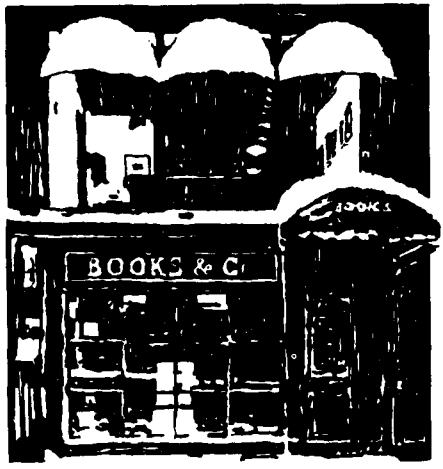

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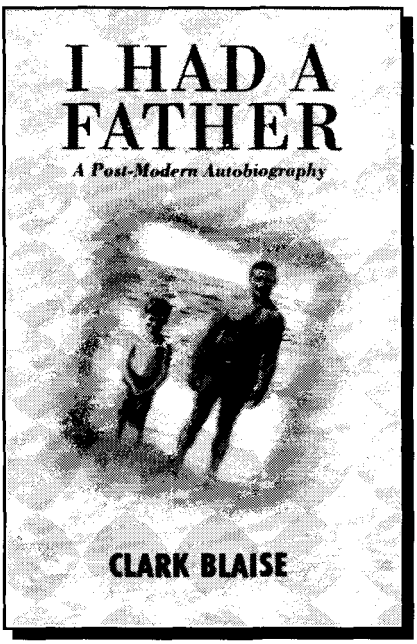

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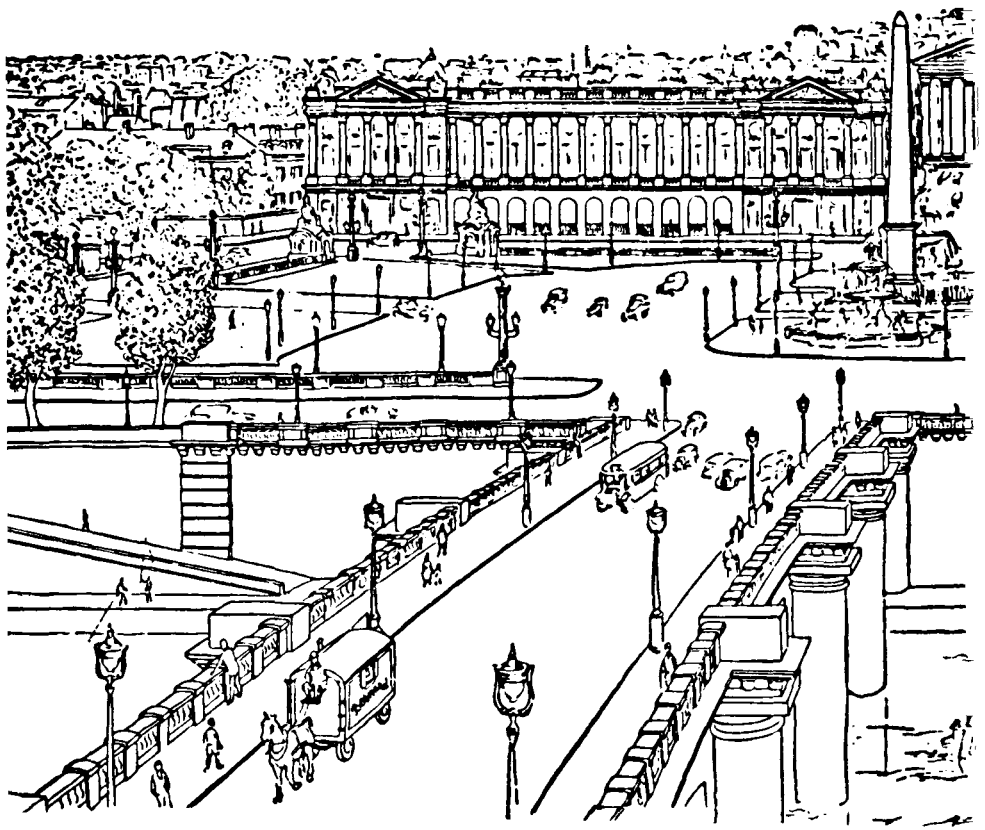

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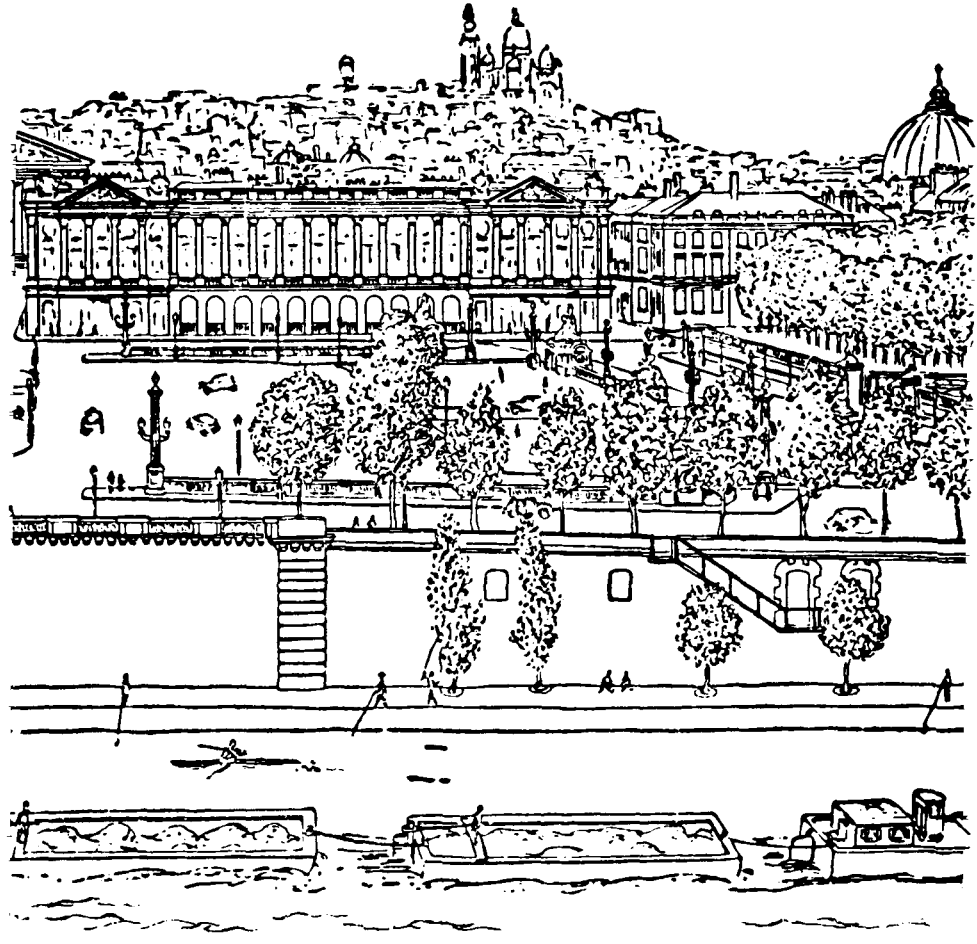

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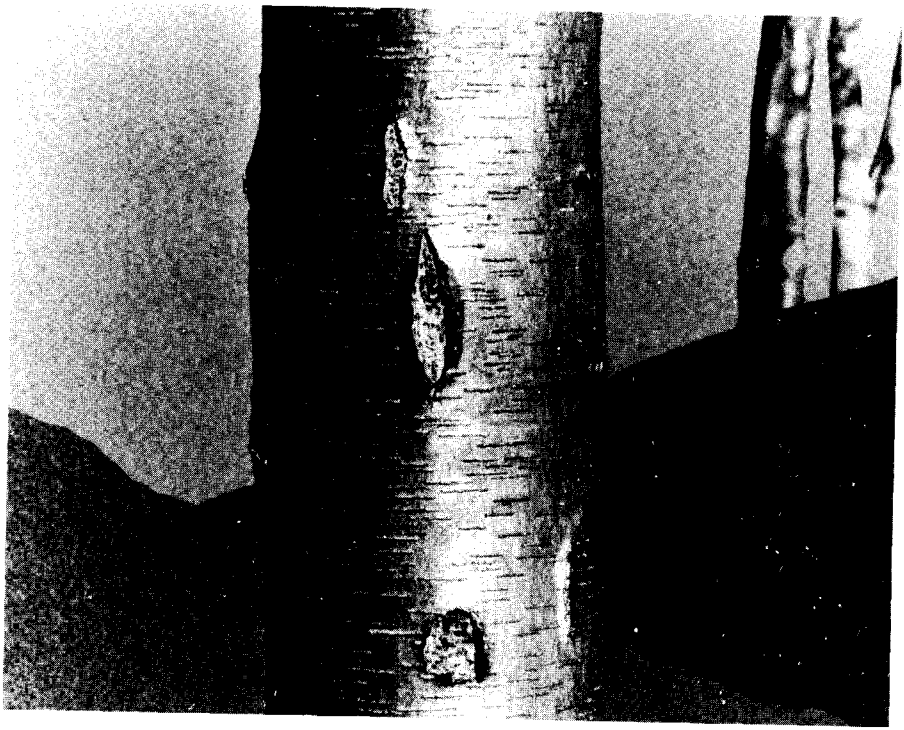

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Batting against Castro

Jim Shepard

In 1951 you couldn't get us to talk politics. Ball players then would just as soon talk bed wetting as talk politics. Tweener Jordan brought up the H-bomb one seventh inning, sitting there tarring up his useless Louisville Slugger at the end of a Bataan Death March of a road trip when it was 104° on the field and about nine of us in a row had just been tied in knots by Maglie and it looked like we weren't going to get anyone on base in the next five weeks except for those hit by pitches, at which point someone down the end of the bench told Tweener to put a lid on it, and he did, and that was the end of the H-bomb as far as the Philadelphia Phillies was concerned.

I was one or two frosties shy of outweighing my bat and wasn't exactly known as Mr. Heavy Hitter; in fact me and Charley Caddell, another Pinemaster from the Phabulous Phillies, were known far and wide as such banjo hitters that they called us—right to our faces, right during a game, like confidence or bucking up a teammate was for noolies and nosedroops—Flatt and Scruggs. Pick us a tune, boys, they'd say, our own teammates, when it came time for the eighth

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and ninth spots in the order to save the day. And Charlie and I would grab our lumber and shoot each other looks like we were the Splinter himself, misunderstood by everybody, and up we'd go to the plate against your basic Newcombe or Erskine cannon volleys. Less knowledgeable fans would cheer. The organist would pump through the motions and the twenty-seven thousand who did show up (PHILS WHACKED IN TWI-NIGHTER; SLUMP CONTINUES; LOCALS SEEK TO SALVAGE LAST GAME OF HOME STAND) wouldn't say boo. Our runners aboard would stand there like they were watching furniture movers. One guy in our dugout would clap. A pigeon would set down in right field and gook around. Newcombe or Erskine would look in at us like litter was blowing across their line of sight. They'd paint the corners with a few unhittable ones just to let us know what a mismatch this was. Then Charley would dink one to second. It wouldn't make a sound in the glove. I'd strike out. And the fans would cuff their kids or scratch their rears and cheer. It was like they were celebrating just how bad we could be.

I'd always come off the field looking at my bat, trademark up, like I couldn't figure out what happened. You'd think by that point I would've. I tended to be hitting about .143.

Whenever we were way down, in the 12 to 2 range, Charley played them up, our sixth- or seventh-, or worse, ninth-inning Waterloos—tipped his cap and did some minor posing—and for his trouble got showered with whatever the box seats didn't feel like finishing: peanuts, beer, the occasional hot-dog roll. On what was the last straw before this whole Cuba thing, after we'd gone down one-two and killed a bases-loaded rally for the second time that day, the boxes around the dugout got so bad that Charley went back out and took a curtain call, like he'd clubbed a round-tripper. The fans howled for parts of his body. The Dodgers across the way laughed and pointed. In the time it took Charley to lift his cap and wave someone caught him in the mouth with a metal whistle from a Cracker Jack box and chipped a tooth.

"You stay on the pine," Skip said to him while he sat there-trying to wiggle the ivory in question. "I'm tired of your antics." Skip was our third-year manager who'd been through

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it all, seen it all and lost most of the games along the way.

"What's the hoo-ha?" Charley wanted to know. "We're down eleven–nothing."

Skip said that Charley reminded him of Dummy Hoy, the deaf-mute who played for Cincinnati all those years ago. Skip was always saying things like that. The first time he saw me shagging flies he said I was the picture of Skeeter Scalzi.

"Dummy Hoy battled .287 lifetime," Charley said. "I'll take that anytime."

The thing was, we were both good glove men. And this was the Phillies. If you could do anything right, you were worth at least a spot on the pine. After Robin Roberts, our big gun on the mound, it was Katie bar the door.

"We're twenty-three games back," Skip said. "This isn't the time for bush-league stunts."

It was late in the season, and Charley was still holding that tooth and in no mood for a gospel from Skip. He let fly with something in the abusive range, and I, I'm ashamed to say, became a disruptive influence on the bench and backed him up.

Quicker than you could say Wally Pipp, we were on our way to Allentown for some Double A discipline.

Our ride out there was not what you'd call high-spirited. The Allentown bus ground gears and did ten, tops. It really worked over those switchbacks on the hills, to maximize the dust coming through the windows. Or you could shut the windows and bake muffins.

Charley was across the aisle, sorting through the paper. He'd looked homicidal from the bus station on.

"We work on our hitting, he's got to bring us back," I said. "Who else has he got?" Philadelphia's major-league franchise was at that point in pretty bad shape, with a lot of kids filling gaps left by the hospital patients.

Charley mentioned an activity involving Skip's mother. It colored the ears of the woman sitting in front of us.

It was then I suggested the winter leagues, Mexico or Cuba.

"How about Guam?" Charley said. "How about the Yukon?" He hawkered out the window.

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Here was my thinking: the season was almost over in Allentown, which was also, by the way, in the cellar. We probably weren't going back up afterwards. That meant that starting October we either cooled our heels playing pepper in Pennsylvania, or we played winter ball. I was for Door Number Two.

Charley and me, we had to do something about our self-esteem. It got so I'd wince just to see my name in the sports pages—before I knew what it was about, just to see my name. Charley's full name was Charles Owen Caddell, and he carried a handsome suitcase around the National League that had his initials, C.O.C., in big letters near the handle. When asked what they stood for, he always said, "Can o' Corn."

Skip we didn't go to for fatherly support. Skip tended to be hard on the non-regulars, who he referred to as "you egg-sucking noodle-hanging gutter trash."

Older ballplayers talked about what it was like to lose it: the way your teammates would start giving you the look, the way you could see in their eyes, Three years ago he'd make that play, or He's lost a step going to the hole; the quickness isn't there. The difference was, Charley and me, we'd seen that look since we were twelve.

So Cuba seemed like the savvy move: a little seasoning, a little time in the sun, some senoritas, drinks with hats, maybe a curve ball Charley *could* hit, a heater I could do more than foul off.

Charley took some convincing. He'd sit there in the Allentown dugout, riding the pine even in Allentown, whistling air through his chipped tooth and making faces at me. This Cuba thing was stupid, he'd say. He knew a guy played for the Athletics went down to Mexico or someplace, drank a cup of water with bugs in it that would've turned Dr. Salk's face white and went belly-up between games of a doubleheader. "Shipped home in a box they had to *seal*," Charley said. He'd tell that story, and his tooth would whistle for emphasis.

But really what other choice did we have? Between us we had the money to get down there, and I knew a guy on the Pirates who was able to swing the connections. I finished the year batting .143 in the bigs and .167 in Allentown. Charley

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hit his weight and pulled off three errors in an inning his last game. When we left, our Allentown manager said, "Boys, I hope you hit the bigs again. Because we sure can't use you around here."

So down we went on the train and then the slow boat, accompanied the whole way by a catcher from the Yankee system, a big bird from Minnesota named Ericksson. Ericksson was out of Triple A and apparently had a fan club there because he was so fat. I guess it had gotten so he couldn't field bunts. He said the Yankee brass was paying for this. They thought of it as a fat farm.

"The thing is, I'm not fat," he said. We were pulling out of some skeeter-and-water stop in central Florida. One guy sat on the train platform with his chin on his chest, asleep or dead. "That's the thing. What I am is big boned." He held up an arm and squeezed it the way you'd test a melon.

"I like having you in the window seat," Charley said, his Allentown hat down over his eyes. "Makes the whole trip shady."

Ericksson went on to talk about feet. This shortened the feel of the trip considerably. Ericksson speculated that the smallest feet in the history of the major leagues belonged to Art Herring, who wore a size three. Myril Hoag, apparently, wore one size four and one size four and a half.

We'd signed a deal with the Cienfuegos club: seven hundred a month and two-fifty for expenses. We also got a place on the beach, supposedly, and a woman to do the cleaning, though we had to pay her bus fare back and forth. It sounded a lot better than the Mexican League, which had teams with names like Coatzacoalcos. Forget the Mexican League, Charley'd said when I brought it up. Once I guess he'd heard some retreads from that circuit talking about the Scorpions, and he'd said, "They have a team with that name?" and they'd said no.

When Ericksson finished with feet he wanted to talk politics. Not only the whole Korean thing—truce negotiations, we're on a thirty-one-hour train ride with a Swedish glom who wants

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to talk truce negotiations – but this whole thing with Cuba and other Latin American countries and Kremlin expansionism. Ericksson could get going on Kremlin expansionism.

"Charley's not much on politics," I said, trying to turn off the spigot.

"You can talk politics if you want," Charley said from under his hat. "Talk politics. I got a degree. I can keep up. I got a B.S. from Schenectady." The B.S. stood for Boots and Shoes, meaning he worked in a factory.

So there we were in Cuba. Standing on the dock, peering into the sun, dragging our big duffel bags like dogs that wouldn't cooperate.

We're standing there sweating on our bags and wondering where the team rep who's supposed to meet us is, and meanwhile a riot breaks out about a block and a half away. We thought it was a block party at first. This skinny guy in a pleated white shirt and one of those cigar-ad pointed beards was racketing away at the crowd, which was yelling and carrying on. He was over six feet. He looked strong, wiry, but in terms of heft somewhere between flyweight and poster child. He was scoring big with some points he was making holding up a bolt of cloth. He said something that got them all going and up he went onto somebody's shoulders, and they paraded him around past the storefronts, everybody shouting, "Cas*tro*! Cas*tro*! Cas*tro*!" which Charley and me figured was the guy's name. We were still sitting there in the sun like idiots. They circled around past us and stopped. They got quiet, and we looked at each other. The man of the hour was giving us his fearsome bandito look. He was tall. He was skinny. He was just a kid. He didn't look at all happy to see us.

He looked about ready to say something that was not any kind of welcome when the *policia* waded in, swinging clubs like they were getting paid by the concussion. Which is when the riot started. The team rep showed up. We got hustled out of there.

We got there, it turned out, a few weeks into the season. Cienfuegos was a game down in the loss column to its big rival, Marianao. Charley called it Marianne.

Cuba took more than a little getting used to. There was

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the heat: one team we played had a stadium that sat in a kind of natural bowl that held in the sun and dust. The dust floated around you like a golden fog. It glittered. Water streamed down your face and back. Your glove dripped. One of our guys had trouble finding the plate, and while I stood there creeping in on the infield dirt sweat actually puddled around my feet.

There were the fans: one night they pelted each other and the field with live snakes.

There were the pranks: as the outsiders, Charley and me expected the standards—the shaving-cream-in-the-shoe, the multiple hotfoot—but even so never got tired of the bird-spider-in-the-cap, or the crushed-chiles-in-the-water-fountain. Many's the time, after such good-natured ribbing from our Latino teammates, we'd still be holding our ribs, toying with our bats and wishing we could identify the particular jokester in question.

There was the travel: the bus trips to the other side of the island that seemed to take short careers. I figured Cuba, when I figured it at all, like something about the size of Long Island, but I was not close. During one of those trips Ericksson, the only guy still in a good mood, leaned over his seat back and gave me the bad news: if you laid Cuba over the eastern United States, he said, it'd stretch from New York to Chicago. Or something like that.

And from New York to Chicago the neighborhood would go right down the toilet, Charley said, next to me.

Sometimes we'd leave right after a game, I mean without showering, and that meant no matter how many open windows you were able to manage you smelled bad feet and armpit all the way there and all the way back. On the mountain roads and switchbacks we counted roadside crosses and smashed guardrails on the hairpin turns. One time Charley, his head out the window to get any kind of air, looked way down into an arroyo and kept looking. I asked him what he could see down there. He said a glove and some bats.

And finally there was what Ericksson called A Real Lack of Perspective. He was talking, of course, about that famous

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South of the Border hotheadness we'd all seen even in the bigs. In our first series against Marianao after Charley and I joined the team (the two of us went two for twenty-six, and we got swept; so much for gringos to the rescue) an argument at home plate—not about whether the guy was out, but about whether the tag had been too hard—brought out both managers, both benches, one or two retirees from both teams, a blind batboy who kept feeling around everyone's legs for the discarded lumber, a drunk who'd been sleeping under the stands, reporters, a photographer, a couple of would-be beauty queens, the radio announcers and a large number of interested spectators. I forget how it came out.

After we dropped a doubleheader in Havana our manager had a pot broken over his head. It turned out the pot held a plant, which he kept and replanted. After a win at home our starting third baseman was shot in the foot. We asked our manager, mostly through sign language, why. He said he didn't know why they picked the foot.

But it was more than that, too: on days off we'd sit in our hammocks and look out our floor-to-ceiling windows and our screened patios and smell our garden with its flowers with the colors from Mars and the breeze with the sea in it, and we'd feel like DiMaggio in his penthouse, as big league as big league could get. We'd fish on the coral reefs for yellowtail and mackerel, for shrimp and rock lobster. We'd cook it ourselves. Ericksson started eating over, and he did great things with coconut and lime and beer.

And our hitting began to improve.

One for five, one for four, two for five, two for five with two doubles: the box scores were looking up and up, Spanish or not. One night we went to an American restaurant in Havana, and on the place on the check for comments I wrote, *I went 3 for 5 today*.

Cienfuegos went on a little streak: nine wins in a row, fourteen out of fifteen. We caught and passed Marianao. Even Ericksson was slimming down. He pounced on bunts and stomped around home plate like a man killing bees before gunning runners out. We were on a winner.

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Which is why politics, like it always does, had to stick its nose in. The president of our tropical paradise, who reminded Charley more of Akim Tamiroff than Harry Truman, was a guy named Batista who was not well-liked. This we could tell because when we said his name even in our cracked Spanish our teammates would repeat it and then spit on the ground or our feet. We decided to go easy on the political side of things and keep mostly mum on the subject of our opinions, which we mostly didn't have. Ericksson threatened periodically to get us all into trouble or, worse, a discussion, except his Spanish was even more terrible than ours, and the first time he tried to talk politics everyone agreed absolutely with what he was saying and then brought him a bedpan.

Neither of us, as I said before, were much for the front of the newspaper, but you didn't have to be Mr. News to see that Cuba was about as bad as it got in terms of who was running what: the payoffs got to the point where we figured that guys getting sworn in for public office put their hands out instead of up. We paid off local mailmen to get our mail. We paid off traffic cops to get through intersections. It didn't seem like the kind of thing that could go on forever, especially since most of the Cubans on the island didn't get expense money.

So this Batista—"Akim" to Charley—wasn't doing a good job, and it looked like your run-of-the-mill Cuban was hot about that. He kept most of the money for himself and his pals. If you were on the outs and needed food or medicine it was pretty much your hard luck. And according to some of our teammates, when you went to jail—for whatever, for spitting on the sidewalk—bad things happened to you. Relatives wrote you off.

So there were a lot of protests, *demonstraciones*, that winter, and driving around town in cabs we always seemed to run into them, which meant trips out to eat or to pick up the paper might run half the day. It was the only non-fineable excuse for showing up late to the ballpark.

But then the demonstrations started at the games, in the stands. And guess who'd usually be leading them, in his little

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pleated shirt and a Marianao cap? We'd be two or three innings in, and the crowd out along the third-base line would suddenly get up like the chorus in a Busby Berkeley musical and start singing and swaying back and forth, their arms in the air. The first time it happened Batista himself was in the stands watching the game, surrounded by like forty bodyguards. He had his arms crossed and was staring over at Castro, who had *his* arms crossed and was staring back. Charley was at the plate, and I was on deck.

Charley walked over to me, bat still on his shoulder. I'm not sure anybody had called time. The pitcher was watching the crowd, too. "Now what *is* this?" Charley wanted to know.

I told him it could have been a religious thing, or somebody's birthday. He looked at me. "I mean like a national hero's, or something," I said.

He was still peering over at Castro's side of the crowd, swinging his bat to keep limber, experimenting with that chipped-tooth whistle. "What're they saying?" he asked.

"It's in Spanish," I said.

Charley shook his head and then shot a look over to Batista on the first base side. "Akim's gonna love this," he said. But Batista sat there like this happened all the time. The umpire straightened every inch of clothing behind his chest protector and then had enough and started signaling play to resume, so Charley got back into the batter's box, dug in, set himself, and unloaded big time on the next pitch and put it on a line without meaning to into the crowd on the third-base side. A whole side of the stands ducked, and a couple people flailed and went down like they were shot. You could see people standing over them.

Castro in the meantime stood in the middle of this with his arms still folded, like Peary at the Pole, or Admiral Whoever taking grapeshot across the bow. You had to give him credit.

Charley stepped out of the box and surveyed the damage, cringing a little. Behind him I could see Batista, his hands together over his head, shaking them in congratulation.

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"Wouldn't you know it," Charley said, still a little rueful. "I finally get a hold of one and zing it foul."

"I hope nobody's dead over there," I said. I could see somebody holding up a hat and looking down, like that was all that was left. Castro was still staring out over the field.

"Wouldn't that be our luck," Charley said, but he did look worried.

Charley ended up doubling, which the third-base side booed, and then stealing third, which they booed even more. While he stood on the bag brushing himself off and feeling quite the pepperpot, Castro stood up and caught him flush on the back of the head with what looked like an entire burrito of some sort. Mashed beans flew.

The crowd loved it. Castro sat back down, accepting congratulations all around. Charley, when he recovered, made a move like he was going into the stands, but no one in the entire stadium went for the bluff. So he just stood there with his hands on his hips, the splattered third baseman pointing him out to the crowd and laughing. He stood there on third and waited for me to bring him home so he could spike the catcher to death. He had onions and probably some ground meat on his cap.

That particular Cold-War crisis ended with my lining out, a rocket, to short.

In the dugout afterwards I told Charley it had been that same guy, Castro, from our first day on the dock. He said that that figured and that he wanted to work on his bat control so he could kill the guy with a line drive if he ever saw him in the stands again.

This Castro came up a lot. There was a guy on the team, a light-hitting left fielder named Rafa, who used to lecture us in Spanish, very worked up. Big supporter of Castro's. You could see he was upset about something. Ericksson and I would nod, like we'd given what he was on about some serious thought, and were just about to weigh in on that very subject. I'd usually end the meetings by giving him a thumbs-up and heading out onto the field. Ericksson knew it was about politics so he was interested. Charley had no patience for it on good

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days and hearing this guy bring up Castro didn't help. Every so often he'd say across our lockers, "He wants to know if you want to meet his sister."

Finally Rafa took to bringing an interpreter, and he'd find us at dinners, waiting for buses, taking warm-ups, and up would come the two of them, Rafa and his interpreter, like this was sports day at the U.N. Rafa would rattle on while we went about our business, and then his interpreter would take over. His interpreter said things like, "This is not your tropical playground." He said things like, "The government of the United States will come to understand the Cuban people's right to self-determination." He said things like, "The people will rise up and crush the octopus of the North."

"He means the Yankees, Ericksson," Charley said.

Ericksson meanwhile had that big Nordic brow all furrowed, ready to talk politics.

You could see Rafa thought he was getting through. He went off on a real rip, and when he finished the interpreter said only, "The poverty of the people in our Cuba is very bad."

Ericksson hunkered down and said, "And the people think Batista's the problem?"

"Lack of money's the problem," Charley said. The interpreter gave him the kind of look the hotel porter gives you when you show up with seventeen bags. Charley made a face back at him as if to say, Am I right or wrong?

"The poverty of the people is very bad," the interpreter said again. He was stubborn. He didn't have to tell us: on one road trip we saw a town, like a used car lot, of whole families, big families, living in abandoned cars. Somebody had a cradle thing worked out for a baby in an overturned fender.

"What do you want from us?" Charley asked.

"You are supporting the corrupt system," the interpreter said. Rafa hadn't spoken and started talking excitedly, probably asking what'd just been said.

Charley took some cuts and snorted. "Guy's probably been changing everything Rafa wanted to say," he said.

We started joking that poor Rafa'd only been trying to talk

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about how to hit a curve. They both gave up on us, and walked off. Ericksson followed them.

"Dag Hammarskjöld," Charley said, watching him go. When he saw my face he said, "I read the papers."

But this Castro guy set the tone for the other ballparks. The demonstrations continued more or less the same way (without the burrito) for the last two weeks of the season, and with three games left we found ourselves with a two game lead on Marianao, and we finished the season guess where against guess who.

This was a big deal to the fans because Marianao had no imports, no Americans, on their team. Even though they had about seven guys with big league talent, to the Cubans this was David and Goliath stuff. Big America vs. Little Cuba, and our poor Rafa found himself playing for big America.

So we lost the first two games, by ridiculous scores, scores like 18–5 and 16–1. The kind of scores where you're playing out the string after the third inning. Marianao was charged up and we weren't. Most of the Cuban guys on our team, as you'd figure, were a little confused. They were all trying—money was involved here—but the focus wasn't exactly there. In the first game we came unraveled after Rafa dropped a pop-up that went about seven thousand feet up into the sun, and in the second we were just wiped out by a fat forty-five-year-old pitcher that people said when he had his control and some sleep the night before, was unbeatable.

Castro and Batista were at both games. During the seventh-inning stretch of the second game, with Marianao now tied for first place, Castro led the third-base side in a Spanish version of *Take Me out to the Ball Game*.

They jeered us—Ericksson, Charley and me—every time we came up. And the more we let it get to us, the worse we did. Ericksson was pressing, I was pressing, Charley was pressing. So we let each other down. But what made it worse was with every roar after one of our strikeouts, with every stadium-shaking celebration after a ball went through our legs, we felt like we were letting America down, like some poor

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guy on an infantry charge who can't even hold up the flag, dragging it along the ground. It got to us.

When Charley was up, I could hear him talking to himself: "The kid can still hit. Ball was in on him, but he got that bat head out in front."

When I was up, I could hear the chatter from Charley: "Gotta have this one. This is where we need you, big guy."

On Friday Charley made the last out. On Saturday I did. On Saturday night we went to the local bar that seemed the safest and got paralyzed. Ericksson stayed home, resting up for the rubber match.

Our Cuban skipper had a clubhouse meeting before the last game. It was hard to have a clear-the-air meeting when some of the teammates didn't understand the language, and were half-paralyzed with hangovers besides, but they went on with it anyway, pointing at us every so often. I got the feeling the suggestion was that the Americans be benched for the sake of morale.

To our Cuban skipper's credit, and because he was more contrary than anything else, he penciled us in.

Just to stick it in Marianao's ear, he penciled us in the 1–2–3 spots in the order.

The game started around three in the afternoon. It was one of the worst hangovers I'd ever had. I walked out into the Cuban sun, the first to carry the hopes of Cienfuegos and America to the plate, and decided that as a punishment I'd been struck blind. I struck out, though I have only the umpire's say-so on that.

Charley struck out too. Back on the bench he squinted like someone looking into car headlights. "It was a good pitch," he said. "I mean it sounded like a good pitch. I didn't see it."

But Ericksson, champion of clean living, stroked one out. It put the lid on some of the celebrating in the stands. We were a little too hungover to go real crazy when he got back to the dugout, but I think he understood.

Everybody, in fact, was hitting but us. A couple guys behind Ericksson including Rafa put together some doubles, and we

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had a 3–0 lead which stood up all the way to the bottom of the inning, when Marianao batted around and through its line-up and our starter and went into the top of the second leading 6–3.

Our guys kept hitting, and so did their guys. At the end of seven we'd gone through four pitchers and Marianao five, Charley and I were regaining use of our limbs, and the score was Cuba 11, Land of the Free 9. We got another run on a passed ball. In the ninth we came up one run down with the sun setting in our eyes over the centerfield fence and yours truly leading off. The crowd was howling like something I'd never heard before. Castro had everybody up and pointing at me on the third-base side. Their arms went up and down together like they were working some kind of hex. Marianao's pitcher—by now their sixth—was the forty-five-year-old fat guy who'd worked the day before. The bags under his eyes were bigger than mine. He snapped off three nasty curves, and I beat one into the ground and ran down the first base line with the jeering following me the whole way.

He broke one off on Charley, too, and Charley grounded to first. The noise was solid, a wall. Everyone was waving Cuban flags.

I leaned close to Charley's ear in the dugout. "You gotta lay off those," I said.

He shook his head. "I never noticed anything wrong with my ability to pull the ball on an outside pitch," he said.

"Then you're the only one in Cuba who hasn't," I said.

But in the middle of this local party with two strikes on him Ericksson hit his second dinger, probably the first time he'd had two in a game since Pony League. He took his time on his home-run trot, all slimmed-down two hundred sixty pounds of him, and at the end he did a somersault and landed on home plate with both feet.

For the Marianao crowd it was like the Marines had landed. When the ball left his bat the crowd noise got higher and higher pitched and then just stopped and strangled. You could hear Ericksson breathing hard as he came back to the bench.

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You could hear the pop of the umpire's new ball in the pitcher's glove.

That sent us into extra innings, a lot of extra innings. It got dark. Nobody scored. Charley struck out with the bases loaded in the sixteenth, and when he came back to the bench someone had poured a beer onto the dugout roof and it was dripping through onto his head. He sat there under it. He said, "I deserve it," and I said, "Yes, you do."

The Marianao skipper overmanaged and ran out of pitchers. He had an outfielder come in and fling a few, and the poor guy walked our eighth and ninth hitters with pitches in the dirt, off the backstop, into the seats. I was up. There was a conference on the mound that included some fans and a vendor. Then there was a roar, and we stretched forward out of the dugout and saw Castro up and moving through the seats to the field. Someone threw him a glove.

He crossed to the mound, and the Marianao skipper watched him come and then handed him the ball when he got there like his relief ace had just come in from the pen. Castro took the outfielder's hat for himself, but that was about it for uniform. The tails of his pleated shirt hung out. His pants looked like Rudolph Valentino's. He was wearing dress shoes.

I turned to the ump. "Is this an exhibition at this point?" I said. He said something in Spanish that I assumed was, "You're in a world of trouble now."

The crowd, which had screamed itself out hours ago, got its second wind. Hurricanes, dust devils, sandstorms in the Sahara—I don't know what the sound was like. When you opened your mouth it came and took your words away.

I looked over at Batista, who was sitting on his hands. How long was this guy going to last if he couldn't even police the national pastime?

Castro toed the rubber, worked the ball in his hand, and stared in at me like he hated everyone I'd ever been associated with.

He was right-handed. He fussed with his cap. He had a windmill delivery. I figured, let him have his fun, and he wound up and cut loose with a fastball behind my head.

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The crowd reacted like he'd struck me out. I got out of the dirt and did the pro brush-off, taking time with all parts of my uniform. Then I stood in again, and he broke a pretty fair curve in by my knees, and down I went again.

What was I supposed to do? Take one for the team? Take one for the country? Get a hit, and never leave the stadium alive? He came back with his fastball high, and I thought, enough of this, and tomahawked it foul. We glared at each other. He came back with a changeup—had this guy pitched somewhere, for somebody?—again way inside, and I thought, forget it, and took it on the hip. The umpire waved me to first, and the crowd screamed about it like we were cheating.

I stood on first. The bases were now loaded for Charley. You could see the Marianao skipper wanted Castro off the mound, but what could he do?

Charley steps to the plate, and it's like the fans had been holding back on the real noisemaking up to this point. There are trumpets, cowbells, police whistles, sirens and the god-awful noise of someone by the foul pole banging two frying pans together. The attention seems to unnerve Charley. I'm trying to give him the old thumbs-up from first, but he's locked in on Castro, frozen in his stance. The end of his bat's making little circles in the air. Castro gave it the old windmill and whipped a curve past his chin. Charley bailed out and stood in again. The next pitch was a curve, too, which fooled him completely. He'd been waiting on the fastball. He started to swing, realized it was curve breaking in on him, and ducked away to save his life. The ball hit his bat anyway. It dribbled out toward Castro. Charley gaped at it and then took off for first. I took off for second. The crowd shrieked. Ten thousand people, one shriek. All Castro had to do was gun it to first and they were out of the inning. He threw it into right field.

Pandemonium. Our eighth and ninth hitters scored. The ball skipped away from the right fielder. I kept running. The catcher'd gone down to first to back up the throw. I rounded third like Man o' War, Charley not far behind me, the fans spilling out onto the field and coming at us like a wave we were beating to shore. One kid's face was a flash of spite under

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a Yankee hat, a woman with long scars on her neck was grabbing for my arm. And there was Castro blocking the plate, dress shoes wide apart, Valentino pants crouched and ready, his face scared and full of hate like I was the entire North American continent bearing down on him.

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Three Poems by A.R. Ammons

Modes against Too Much

My poems, if poems
other than casual
entrances into systems, are

lulls by which
motion going by too
fast as in damaging winds

slows to assume
(forced into the definition of)
mediating rhythms,

sketchy but entangling
knots, in this
wind tight patterns

obstructive and unyielding
likely to come down
or be hauled off whole,

criss-cross trellises
in typhoon, say:
but bits, strings,

swerving (lessening and
swelling) elongations
that giving to

the wind like high water or
sails catch a part
of it formed into known
ways, let go, withstood.

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Death and Silhouettes

Harassed with inquiry, I
waited up by a scale-flaked
boulder in a willow glen,

the pond there such glass
insects' dips riffled it
whole:

suppose the end gusts through
here someday, though,
I said. . . .

so let whatever is in being
meaning to be said out be said
unless this is where

saying gives meaning up,
the heart
airtight with perfection,

time come round at last:
glow
near dusk melted the pines,

the moonbridge's shadow
stone-stable
in water: may

the whole be touched
to push things on
after heart's-ease once? . . .

when a gull struck
the pond and lifted away
a minnow's whole absence.

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The Crystal Tree

May we tinker with nature, define &
adopt, adjust her procedures, till
we can make a nature

that unwinds us at last from
the coils of nature: but
giving ourselves over in the

admiration of study, measuring
the delicacies of balance,
the fineries of difference,

how may we get free enough
not to think ourselves
sacrilegious in overturning

dynamisms so spelled out
into spellings of our own
slightly askew: some of us

may study and admire, even praise,
perhaps, while others assume
the lofty scantlings of

arrogance and twist
the workings our way, forcing
our ends: and our ends, that

we may not die, or that we
may build what keeping itself
perfect cannot die, glass

intelligences freed at last
to roam immortal ranges
out there: not to die,

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this the will arisen on an orb's skin
where death's transmission's
nearest absolute, a

single victory from it our
widest claim: but if it is
not the end of matter to make

good people or people good,
we may envision the fierce
laying nature waste

that brought death in
and we may conquer and
rebuild till nature,

against itself, supports
the eternal life it
never would allow, though

it let the will arise,
disguised and mute at first,
then bespoken as by one

exceeding his standing,
varying his way,
commanding: this one

is coming up among us, his
demand answering,
to balance our fall,

even if to the end of
the human,
beginning the truly unknown.

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Four Poems by Cynthia Kraman

In the Reading Room of the 42nd Street Library

These good New Yorkers bent low over books
deserve a Paradise of softer chairs
and sleep, their heads against that fringed and white
length of swan neck, spotless, damp, sleek, warm,
to recover on, after a god's form

has entered and taken them willingly
thoroughly, and with great, big, tender sighs.
They deserve that mythic neck, a Christian
heaven, the upliftings of good fiction,
cushioned seats, and sweet poetic dictions.

But softly one hears, from almost still lips:
"They no longer pasture on new meadows."
Then, "Poets sound like salesmen, talkshow hosts . . .
Who's *'molle atque facetum'*? Speak!—
wonderful human—from the mountain peak . . ."

They mumble this from their vast, troubled ooze
of dream, as the dusty light filters in.
Only in their fragile sleep a singer
reappears, the notes begin to linger
and sound, only here time's scraping finger

begins to carve some worthwhile heap of words
to scatter widely for a swan's return
to paint the visionary dreariness
to light the dawn coming up like thunder
that breaks like ice down the face of wonder.

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Nothing but Margery Kempe

Alas that ever I did sin! It is full merry in Heaven.
—**The Book of Margery Kempe,** 14th century

Think of Margery Kempe, who laughed and cried
while worshipping along the grassy walks,
who sought salvation with an open heart
and nothing but her mouth turned up or down,
to prove her faith to a bishop or crown.

Did she carry a staff? Wear otter shoes?
And a hat of brick filled with tousled sweat?
Did she carry a purse with a barb or pearl?
One might guess that the agony that swirled
in the midst of her mirth was her bond with the world.

Consider Margery comic, also
consider her as she loved her husband—
desperately, with physical passion
so that nothing but her legal desire
threatened to put her into the fire.

She feared hell, loved heaven, and the angel's tooth
that gnaws away the flesh with temperance—
think of this woman, who was half a saint,
that the yearning for God could make her faint
in the midst of laughing off life's gross taint.

It's enough to make others laugh and cry
when someone is doing it all the time—
who has a husband so in love that he
doesn't seem to mind. One could laugh, and cry—
until in the natural way, one died.

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Chaucer at Aldgate

Late in the century, Chaucer stretches
having just finished with his reckonings
in wool, checking them all against the chits
of rich and cunning men like Philipot
and Bembre (seeing what passes, and not)

before blotting down the columns of ink—
he closes the book with a pursed lip
and glances from the customhouse window
he gets up, saunters outside (an elbow
of velvet freshening the stones, set low)

finally he makes his way to Aldgate,
and finally sits *at another book*.
It is his book, and each book is a house,
each made within the gated city wall
which houses, too, the poet's musing hall

long and luxurious and always filled
with lovers' doubts, a fallen maiden's tears,
Latin consolations, what bright birds said
squawking over love, the echoing tread
of famous heroes rising from the dead.

The customhouse is a small, simple spot
for all of its dumbshow of knowingness,
men trade, men cheat, men horde for King and self—
but worlds are coming, raucous and devout
as Chaucer, pale at Aldgate, writes them out.

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Chaucer at Park House

And here we are at last in the forest,
green, a depth of green seen from a saddle,
the horse under it steaming, stops. Closed nose,
a trumpet, opens. His foamed mouth, a sack,
sucks up green water out of the brown muck.

The poet sits quietly looking around.
Then galloping, galloping, galloping
out of his old age, into the sweet reply
everywhere darting like a dragonfly,
(wings scratching against an astonished sky)

something starts up, hovering in the air—
so Chaucer lightly holds his pen aloft—
scratches his head, unbottles both his ears—
and hears something near getting very loud,
very ardent, caressing,—a great crowd

spills into the meadow. They sit around
the poet's feet and around his two arms,
eyes, head, heart. Chaucer reaches to a leaf.
How smooth it is, and what a relief
the horse has in making a meal so sweet.

The horse munches, casting a slow horse eye
on the pilgrims arriving now and then
and settling in under the great trees.
Here, deep in the enigmatic forest,
Chaucer welcomes himself as the last guest.

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Three Poems by Paul Kane

Disciples Asleep at Gethsemane

I

I have dreamt a dream of fulfillment, of freedom:
she was an old woman, with a face like the moon,
first full with reflection, then new and dark, and then
we were in a garden and the fountains murmured
words I wanted so much to hear, but mixed suddenly
with harsher tones, with disappointment—a man's voice.
I don't deny it: I hold hard to my needs, myself.

II

Who was I to be chosen? It was late, and I understood
so little—though that little after my own fashion,
and who am I not to be accounted as good as anyone else?
I slept, and in my sleep knew I slept, and dreamed of being
awake—it was enough, surely, for I had been chosen.
Three times he returned and spoke, but I enfolded him
into myself, hearing him say, "Sleep, and take your rest."

III

There was a meal, a hymn, some wine, and I followed,
wanting to be part of it all. We climbed a hill where
the trees were silver in the darkness, and a wind sighed
about us. It seemed to speak to my heart, saying, "This is
more than you," and so I listened, and followed, knelt
and entered that voice. And then there were lights, a crowd,
confusion, a kiss, and a naked man running away into
the dark.

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IV

Three times nothing—still nothing, and those
brought to keep faith sleep in the garden.
The master dead, the dream erodes from within,
and sweet hope is made sweeter by perversion:
when it comes down to one, it comes down.
The land is gall—nor milk, nor honey flow,
and false friends keep watch unawake.

Time Was

Still, I must not forget that I once managed
to put these things into writing.
—Blanchot

When the high-pitched sounds of the August continuo
circulated like breezes through the immovable heat,
time was a single leaf drifting upwards, then down.

In the emptying out, the vacating of routine,
the laboring fullness came to pass, and became,
in passing, what went before and never came again:

the bellflower, blue against the lichened rock,
the sudden oriole in the cherry tree,
the offhand remark indelible in the mind.

In the morning within the morning, in the midnight
within the noon, word echoed within word—
while the mockingbird sang a palindrome of time.

Between the background of the body, and the fore-
shortened space of speech, we lived in the middle distance
where time was, and was not—where we are living still.

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Mere Islands

I

Above, the red clay cliff, and above that,
a fringe of scrub grass and the overall sky.
Propped against great stones, boulders with ledges
streaked with quartz, we watch the sea roll in,
here, in the midst of the sea, where mere islands,
unmoved, move with the salted air and the sea.
And in our ears, wind and words.

II

The sea is the mother of islands: embraced
by isolation, by the overwhelming whelming—
seas heavy, sea placid—we are held by moods
we cannot affect, separate in our own contrivances.
On the jetty near the wharf, huddled in cold sunlight,
sheltered from the colder air, we open to another life.
And in our ears, wind and words.

III

In hot latitudes, the mother island left behind, a smaller,
offshore, before us: skies in the colors of a pencil set
turn over in easy days with a lazy latitude; noonness
pervades, the air moves to readjust the too perfect
picture of flowering trees and motu palms:
like that book between us, it beggars description.
And in our ears, wind and words.

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IV

Here: ragged trees, fronds dried out to the point
of menace, stricken, like the island itself, by another
sort of poverty, the lush greenness of growing
beyond support, where the mere mention of the sea
is like an insult—that proximate, enduring plight,
that ugly real at the heart of beauty.
And in our ears, wind and words.

V

Island nation, island people—we are both:
the sea surrounds us on all sides, and washes up
into our dreams at night. We dream of it by day:
the image the shadow of the word, and the word
illumination of desire—mere mother sea of what
we are, or simply wish for, in this inseparate world.
And in our ears, wind and words.

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Two Poems by Lynn Powell

Revelation

Roxy lifts her furrowed face and opens
her mouth for another hunk of banana muffin.
Her eyes are matted shut; her white hair wild as Isaiah's.
Craving apple turnovers and sweet potato pie,
she mutters *thanks* for my careful gift,
but I wish you'd try to kill me with sugar, she adds,
with perfect disdain for her elusive death.
God has confided to her she'll stay put until the Rapture,
won't ever feel the deep freefall from exhaustion and ache.

So she complains: irritable with the promise of trumpets,
assorted millennia. She wants to get on with it—
no loss left for her to fear, not the shedding of her sagged,
lichened skin, nor the mask of her Methuselan face.
I'd bet good money He could find room right now for one more
and then she says *angel* as if in contrition, as if to relinquish
her life-long qualm about the impracticality of wings.
She's ready for the promised new flesh,
the replenishing of the heart's emptied cache.

I watch her as she dozes and consider
this career leap to obedience improbable:
her tongue still licking her lips in the habit of hunger,
her hand, a fistful of knuckles, in my hand.
And I think, how heartbreaking and human, how predictable
really, this longing to salvage and restore the body—
as if ruin, written on the flesh at birth,
could be erased once time has washed over it
and spelled out the same, sad, immutable text.

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A cloud of ammonia drifts up into the room
as she pees on the sheepskin laid down for her bedsores.
I hesitate, then pull back the blanket to change her gown
and uncover a surprise: a belly relaxed out
of its stretch and pucker, creamy, polished,
the marks of birthing rubbed to a patina,
to a whorl of sheen translucent as the Lord's thumbprint—
and the hairs of the pubis, lying thick and straight
like grass, silvered and smoothed by strong wind.

Nativity

Some parents shy away from the body,
but we hush up about the cross—
rereading our daughter the story about Jesus
we most believe in: mother
and father kneeling after the hard birth,
humbled by the exhaustions of love.

She studies the illustration, loves
the halos wide brimmed on everybody's
heads. Five pages later, though, it's death
that rivets her—Herod, jealous and cross,
ordering the slaughter. The unnamed mothers
are left out of this version of the Christ,

but our daughter worries if God
warned them in time, too. She senses love,
though fierce, is not omnipotent. *Mommy,*
what's the baddest thing that can happen to somebody?
she asks, remembering the museum, the crosses
hung a step away from the joyful births,

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stark scripture plain enough to a child: death
looks back at every birth, even God's.
She punishes the sentries at the cross
in her own drawings, coloring their unloved
faces blue, grinding green into their bodies.
Once I whispered to my mother,

I think God would have picked me as Mother
Mary if He'd sent his Son right now—though birth
and the other secrets of the body
still eluded me. Now my daughter calls, *Jesus!*
to her baby brother, a prop, lovingly
swaddled in blue dish towels, his head criss-crossed

with paisley scarves. As Mary, she crosses
the room regally, diaphanous in her mother's
hemmed-up nightgown. Outside, the snow loves
everything it touches. Suffering and death
keep their distance from the warm house. Jesus
laughs as Mary tickles his brand-new body.

You be the manger, Mom, Mary says. I cross
my legs, sit the baby, fat with love, on the throne of my body,
done with the hard births, the beginnings of God.

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Two Poems by Nancy Eimers

Joy to the World

Why I hate to be up in the air,
dangling in a car on a wire strung between two alps
above the village of Chamonix,
is not that much of a puzzle.
I'm afraid the thread will snap, we'll drop
and smash apart like a music box—
the one I had when I was four, with its painted lid,
a snowy glacier winding around a tiny Swiss chalet
as if to tuck it in. When I lifted the lid,
the whirring butterfly gears played a muted song
I thought of as *Joy to the World* (not the Christmas tune)
because those words made me want to cry,
lying under the covers in late afternoon,
watching the honeyed light brim up in the globes of my eyes
so they wouldn't see sleep coming out of the mountains.
A woman swallows and clenches the handrail
but does this quietly, to herself, as if her fear
were something small and tightly wound
and she wouldn't want it played to the other two of us.
As for myself, I concentrate on looking out, not down,
as if we were thousands of miles from earth,
as if this deep into space we have left behind even nostalgia.
As *if* is the motor that hums and carries us
from the lower peak to the higher
in forty thousand hammering breaths,
and all our reasons—Bill's, the woman's, mine—for braving
this height
shape into tremendous peaks on the other side of the valley,
and, highest of all, Mont Blanc—
what a friend pronounces *Mount Blank* and we always laugh,

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but what I see now is tremendously blank,
what burns in my eyes when I look at something that white,
what chafes my sweaty palms when I think of anything that high.
Just for an instant I feel it, the white, taking everything back,
even words: nothing's been said or ever will be.
Like pages of memory, language is waiting
for something to happen, the slightest change on the slopes
or in the clouds shaping over them.
Then the light backs off, or maybe my eyes adjust
and words streak over our silences
like the fissures we see carved into glacial ice
that, deep underneath, is Windex-blue.
But all along I hated the thought of having to ride back down—
I think that is part of the dread:
some of the whiteness rides down too, like a paper cut.
We have the swaying car to ourselves this time
and so I can't help it, I let go and cry.
And the woman who doesn't ride down with us,
maybe she wants to be alone on the wobbly *teleferique*,
holding her body as rigid inside her clothes
as the gods in their marble skin on the grounds of Versailles,
or the dog I see a few days later in a still life by Chardin,
poised on the verge of upsetting the polished fruit.
Later, in Paris, that woman seems almost a part of history:
Marie Antoinette wandering inside her tiny 18th century
prisonyard of remaining life, stroking the edge of a grassblade,
the way we tease ourselves with the future;
the Mona Lisa, whose skin has a radioactive glow . . .
we spend one afternoon among pendulous roses grown for a royal party,
the little nothings trained into trees of perfumed breath
we breathe as we walk up and down the rows,

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having driven here through the moving parking lots of Paris
where at least we are close to the ground.
On the flight home, dosed with Xanax, I miss the northern
lights
or almost miss them, lifting my heavy head
to blow a vaporous rose on the little window
that blanks out forever the ravening flickers of green.
Then sleep snows me over and I'm not there or even here
in the empty universe that, after Mont Blanc,
can't think of anything else to invent but death.

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On the Phone with My Parents

I didn't know there could be so many silences
listening in on our conversation,
or having their own conversations

like sleepless passengers in a row,
vapors of mingling
gin and vermouth above each empty

plastic airline cup in business class.
Silences cut in and out
along with the phantom voices that sometimes haunt my line:

Panda Bear,
are you stopping in Kalamazoo?
Not on your life. Radiation

has certain side effects. That's all my father says
on bad days,
and who knows how far he's traveled

just to get to our conversation.
He used to travel a lot on business,
and when he came home from New York or Chicago,

part of him seemed missing
less precisely than the Arrow shirts or sock cocoons
entombed in the suitcase lost by TWA.

Lately he's home whenever I call.
My mother's voice is a bright pool
sailboats knife across but

motors aren't allowed to mar.
Like me, she thinks in metaphor: if she slipped
out of focus, she might be a marsh,

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treeless, periodically inundated.
Their side of the conversation floats up the west coast
all the way to Alaska

and passes so close to the hull of a glacier
the cruise director hauls up a bucketful of ice.
Drinks for everyone.

There's that fruity smell of gin and lime,
and the fathomless tinkling of their glasses
drives itself into the icy trees,

the ones on my side, landlocked Kalamazoo
where snow is falling fast and thick,
pouring out of the very streetlight

as if it wanted to bury this town.

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I did not know what to think; I said there had been some mistake, there was nothing else to say. When my father, who was at that time a colonel stationed in Washington, came to visit me, I mentioned it to him. Now I realize I should not have taken his claim of having been first captain was a simple exaggeration. His class had been graduated and commissioned very early, after only about a year and a half at West Point, and returned after the armistice for additional study. Since they were then officers, the ranking second lieutenant among them was, [illegible], their commander. Graduation and hence rank was in order of academic standing, and as first in the class my father had been the ranking lieutenant. We walked on the lawn near the Thayer Hotel and I asked him to help me, in fact I recited a troubling passage I had read that had a tone like Dover Beach. What was I struggling for and what should I believe? He could not answer. It would become clear to me later, he said. He was counting on the school to educate me, a process that in his case had never been completed. Whatever he had learned, in any case, he never passed on to me. He gave me something far less valuable, advice.

There is an idea that one can be changed, that West Point could make you an aristocrat. In its way it did bring one closer to the outdoor life which is the milieu of the aristocrat; sport, hunting, limited hardship. It was however, finally, a school of the lower middle class and once the prestige of a polo team was gone there was no authentic connection with the privileged world. You were an aristocrat only to sergeants and obscure officers. It was a great orphanage, bleak in its architecture, strict in its rules, and set apart from the others by the eminence of its sons.

There was neither love nor kindness. The teachers did not love their pupils or the coach the gleaming, mud-spattered halfback. The word was never spoken though I often heard its opposite. In its place was comradeship and a standard that

A manuscript page from the story "Comet" by James Salter.

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James Salter

The Art of Fiction CXXXIII

James Salter is a consummate storyteller. His manners are precise and elegant; he has a splendid New York accent; he runs his hands through his gray hair and laughs boyishly. At sixty-seven he has the fitness of an ex-military man. He tells anecdotes easily, dramatically, but he also carries an aura of reserve about him. There is a privacy one doesn't breach.

Salter was born in 1925 and raised in New York City. He graduated from West Point in 1945 and was commissioned in the U.S. Army Air Force as a pilot. He served for twelve years in the Pacific, the United States, Europe and Korea, where he flew over one hundred combat missions as a fighter

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pilot. He resigned from the Air Force after his first novel came out in 1957, and settled in Grandview on the Hudson, just north of New York City. He has earned his living as a writer ever since. He has three grown children, a son and two daughters, by a previous marriage. He lives with the writer Kay Eldredge and their eight-year-old son, Theo. They divide their time between Aspen, Colorado and Bridgehampton, Long Island.

Salter has published five novels: The Hunters *(1957),* The Arm of Flesh *(1961),* A Sport and a Pastime *(1967),* Light Years *(1975) and* Solo Faces *(1979). He received an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1982. Five of his stories have appeared in O. Henry collections and one in the* Best American Short Stories. *His collection* Dusk & Other Stories *(1988) received the PEN/Faulkner Award.*

It rained continuously during the four days I visited Bridgehampton in August, 1992, but I scarcely noticed the weather, so content was I to sit at the dining room table asking questions and listening to Salter's carefully considered answers. Even on gray days the traditional, cedar-shingled two-floor house with its many French doors and windows seemed bathed in light. We drank ice tea by day, and one exquisitely made martini each night (Salter at one point estimated that he has had 8,700 martinis in his life). Afterward, company came for dinner; many bottles of wine were consumed; the interviewer wandered off to examine the framed menus on the wall, the etching of two bathers by André de Segonzac, the miniature painting by Sheridan Lord of the landscape near the house.

Salter writes in a study on the second floor, a small, airy room with a peaked ceiling and a half-moon window. His desk is a large wooden country-trestle table made of old pine. Everywhere there are telltale signs of the memoir he has been working on for the past years—envelopes that have been scrawled on, scraps of paper that have been entirely covered with his minute handwriting. On the morning that I was left alone in the study I found well-thumbed copies of Nabokov's

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Speak, Memory *and Isak Dinesen's* Out of Africa *resting on a map of France with places circled and marked. I discovered an aeronautical chart, a sheaf of twelve extremely detailed pages of notes in red, blue and black ink, a journal from 1955 with the sentence written across the front: "Every year seems the most terrible." On the small wooden table next to the desk lay a group of* cahiers, *little soft-covered gray-numbered notebooks, each containing a possible chapter of the memoir. These homemade workbooks are dense with notes—the author's instructions to himself, quotations from other writers, entries that have been color-coded for the place where they might be used. "Life passes into pages if it passes into anything," Salter has written, and to read through these notes is to reconfirm what one knew all along: how meticulously each of his pages is written, how scrupulously each of his chapters constructed. Everything is checked and rechecked, written and revised and then revised again until the prose shimmers, radiant and indestructible.*

Coming down the stairs past the photograph of Isaac Babel I grew once more wildly excited about Salter's work-in-progress. He demurs: "Hope but not enthusiasm is the proper state for the writer."

INTERVIEWER

How do you actually write?

JAMES SALTER

I write in longhand. I am accustomed to that proximity, that feel of writing. Then I sit down and type. And then I retype, correct, retype and keep going until it's finished. It's been demonstrated to me many times that there is some inefficiency in this, but I find that the ease of moving a paragraph is not really what I need. I need the opportunity to write this sentence again, to say it to myself again, to look at the paragraph once more, and actually to go through the whole text, line by line, very carefully, writing it out. There may be

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even some kind of mimetic impulse here where I am trying to write like myself, so to speak.

INTERVIEWER

So it is crucially a process of revision?

SALTER

I hate the first inexact, inadequate expression of things. The whole joy of writing comes from the opportunity to go over it and make it good, one way or another.

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise as you go?

SALTER

It depends, but normally, no. I write big sections and then let them sit. It's dangerous not to let things age, and if something is really good, you should put it away for a month.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of the sentence or the paragraph as an organizing unit?

SALTER

Normally I just go a sentence at a time. I find the most difficult part of writing is to get it down initially because what you have written is usually so terrible that it's disheartening, you don't want to go on. That's what I think is hard—the discouragement that comes from seeing what you have done. This is all you could manage?

INTERVIEWER

You give a lot of attention to the weight and character of individual words.

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SALTER

I'm a *frotteur*, someone who likes to rub words in his hand, to turn them around and feel them, to wonder if that really is the best word possible. Does that word in this sentence have any electric potential? Does it do anything? Too much electricity will make your reader's hair frizzy. There's a question of pacing. You want short sentences and long sentences—well, every writer knows that. You have to develop a certain ease of delivery and make your writing agreeable to read.

INTERVIEWER

I find your prose style wholly distinctive, beautiful and implacable. How did you hit upon it?

SALTER

I like to write. I'm moved by writing. One can't analyze it beyond that.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write every day?

SALTER

No, I'm incapable of that for various reasons. It's either because of the press of affairs or I just haven't brought myself to a position where I'm ready to write anything down.

INTERVIEWER

Do you need a lot of solitude to write?

SALTER

Complete solitude. Although I've made notes for things and even written synopses sitting in trains or on park benches, for the complete composition of things I need absolute solitude, preferably an empty house.

INTERVIEWER

In those circumstances, does writing come easily?

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SALTER

Important novelists often say that writing a novel is hard. I think Anthony Powell said it was like conducting foreign policy—that you have to be prepared to go and do it every day no matter how you feel. But in general, I am unhappy writing something I am not terrifically interested in. Waiting for that interest to be there probably slows down writing a bit. And also my life, which I like, has a lot of travel. It usually takes a while to go somewhere, get organized, sit down, start working.

INTERVIEWER

Does the travel help your writing?

SALTER

It's essential for me. There is no situation like the open road, and seeing things completely afresh. I'm used to traveling. It's not a question of meeting or seeing new faces particularly, or hearing new stories, but of looking at life in a different way. It's the curtain coming up on another act.

I'm not the first person who feels that it's the writer's true occupation to travel. In a certain sense, a writer is an exile, an outsider, always reporting on things, and it is part of his life to keep on the move. Travel is natural. Furthermore, many men of ancient times died on the road, and the image is a strong one. Kings of Arabia, when they are buried, are not given great tombs. They are buried on the side of the road beneath ordinary stones. One thing I saw in England long ago struck me and has always stayed with me. I was going to visit someone in a little village, walking from the railway station across the fields, and I saw an old man, perhaps in his seventies, with a pack on his back. He looked to be a vagabond, dignified, somewhat threadbare, marching along with his staff. A dog trotted at his heels. It was an image I thought should be the final one of a life. Traveling on.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that the word *fiction* is a crude word. Why?

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SALTER

The notion that anything can be invented wholly and that these invented things are classified as *fiction* and that other writing, presumably not made up, is called *nonfiction* strikes me as a very arbitrary separation of things. We know that most great novels and stories come not from things that are entirely invented, but from perfect knowledge and close observation. To say they are made up is an injustice in describing them. I sometimes say that I don't make up anything—obviously, that's not true. But I am usually uninterested in writers who say that everything comes out of the imagination. I would rather be in a room with someone who is telling me the story of his life, which may be exaggerated and even have lies in it, but I want to hear the true story, essentially.

INTERVIEWER

You're saying it's always drawn from life?

SALTER

Almost always. Writing is not a science, and of course there are exceptions, but every writer I know and admire has essentially drawn either from his own life or his knowledge of things in life. Great dialogue, for instance, is very difficult to invent. Almost all great books have actual people in them.

INTERVIEWER

Would you describe your prose style as impressionistic?

SALTER

To be technical, impressionism means outdoor subjects with a lot of color and a breaking away from classicism, isn't that it? Someone said that I write the way Sargent painted. Sargent based his style on direct observation and an economical use of paint—which is close to my own method.

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INTERVIEWER

Your work seems unique in the way it brings together a set of apparently masculine concerns, ordeals, initiations, with an exquisite prose style. Is that how you see it?

SALTER

I've made an effort to nurture the feminine in myself. I don't mean overtly, but in terms of response to things. Perhaps that's what we're talking about. I am happy with my gender, but pure masculinity, which I have been exposed to a lot in life, is tedious and inadequate. It's great to listen to men talk about sports or fights or war or even hunting sometimes, but the presence of the other, the presence of art and beauty, which crude masculinity seems to discount, is essential. Real civilization and real manhood seem to me to include those.

INTERVIEWER

Some readers complain that your work is too male oriented, yet you have said that women are the real heroes. Why?

SALTER

I deem as heroic those who have the harder task, face it unflinchingly and live. In this world women do that.

INTERVIEWER

In "A Single Daring Act" someone says, "You're going to hit the glory road here." There are still heroes in your work.

SALTER

I believe there's a right way to live and to die. The people who can do that are interesting to me. I haven't dismissed heroes or heroism. I presume we're talking of this in the broadest sense and not merely in the sense of goal-line stands or Silver Stars. There is everyday heroism. I think of Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path," about a black woman walking miles to town on the railroad track to get some medicine for her grandchild. I think real devotion is heroic.

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INTERVIEWER

What do you mean when you say that there's a right way to live? Do you mean to be discovered by each of us?

SALTER

No, I don't think it can be invented by every one; that would be too chaotic. I'm referring to the classical, to the ancient, the cultural agreement that there are certain virtues and that these virtues are untarnishable.

INTERVIEWER

A lot of your stories are about people being tested—They're men mostly—but I'm also thinking of the ordeal of Jane Vare in "Twenty Minutes." Does the drama reside in the ordeal?

SALTER

Well, life is an ordeal, isn't it? You're continually being tested. It doesn't seem unusual to me to pick an apex or a dramatic instant of this testing. It's a conventional device of storytelling. And, of course, courage is in there sometimes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your sensibility is French?

SALTER

Not particularly. Ned Rorem said that it is. I like France, and I like the French, but no.

INTERVIEWER

Is Colette a figure who has meant anything to you?

SALTER

Oh, yes. I don't remember when I first came upon her. Probably through Robert Phelps, although I must have read scraps here and there. Phelps was a great Colette scholar who published half a dozen books about her in America, including

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a book I think is sublime, *Earthly Paradise*. It's a wonderful book. I had a copy of it that he inscribed to me. My oldest daughter died in an accident, and I buried it with her because she loved it too.

Colette is a writer one should know something about. I admire the French for their lack of sentimentality, and she, in particular, is admirable in that way. She has warmth; she is not a cold writer, but she is also not sentimental. Somebody said that one should have the same amount of sentiment in writing that God has in considering the earth. She evidences that. There's one story of hers I've read at least a dozen times, "The Little Bouilloux Girl" in *My Mother's House*. It's about the most beautiful girl in the village who is so much more beautiful than any of her classmates, so much more sophisticated, and who quickly gets a job at a dressmaker's shop in town. Everyone envies her and wants to be like her. Colette asks her mother, "Can I have a dress like Nana Bouilloux?" The mother says, "No, you can't have a dress. If you take the dress, you have to take everything that goes with it," which is to say an illegitimate child, and so forth—in short, the whole life of this other girl. The beautiful girl never marries because there is never anyone adequate for her. The high point of the story, which is marvelous because it is such a minor note, comes one summer when two Parisians in white suits happen to come to the village fair. They're staying nearby in a big house, and one of them dances with her. That is the climax of the story in a way. Nothing else ever happens to her. Years later, Colette is coming back to the village. She's thirty-eight now. Driving through town she catches sight of a woman exactly her own age crossing the street in front of her. She recognizes and describes in two or three absolutely staggering sentences the appearance of this once most beautiful girl in the school, "the little Bouilloux girl," still good-looking though aging now, still waiting for the ravisher who never came.

INTERVIEWER

When did you get to know Robert Phelps?

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SALTER

It must have been in the early 1970s. A letter arrived, a singular letter; one recognized immediately that it was from an interesting writer, the voice; and though he refrained from identifying himself, I later saw that he had hidden in the lines of the letter the titles of several of the books he had written. It was a letter of admiration, the most reliable form of initial communication and, as a consequence, we met in New York a few months later when I happened to be there. He was, I discovered, a kind of angel, and he let me know, not immediately, but over a period of time, that I might belong, if not to the highest company, at least to the broad realm of books and names—more was entirely up to me.

Phelps introduced me to the French in a serious way, to Paul Léautaud, Jean Cocteau, Marcel Jouhandeau and others. His life in some respects was like Léautaud's—it was simple. It was unluxurious and pure. Léautaud lived a life of obscurity and only at the very end was rescued from it by appearing on a radio program which overnight brought him to public attention—this quirky, cranky, immensely prejudiced and educated voice of a theater critic and sometime book writer and diarist who had unmercifully viewed life in the theater for some fifty years and lived in a run-down house with dozens of cats and other animals and, in addition to all this, carried on passionate love affairs, one for years with a woman that he identified in his diaries as the Scourge. Phelps had some of that. He lived a very pure life. Books that did not measure up to his standards he simply moved out into the hall and either let people pick up or the trashman take away. He did this periodically. He went through the shelves. So on his shelves you found only the very best things. He believed in writing. Despite every evidence to the contrary in the modern world, he believed in it until the very end. Phelps died about three years ago. I said I thought of him as an angel. I now think of him as a saint.

INTERVIEWER

It seems as if André Gide was a major influence on you at one time.

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SALTER

He was, but I cannot remember exactly why. I read his diaries when I first started writing in earnest, and then I read, and was very impressed by, *Strait Is the Gate*. I had an editor at Harper Brothers, Evan Thomas, who asked me what I was interested in, and I told him I was interested in Gide. A look of bewilderment or dismay crossed his face, as if I'd said Epictetus, and he said, "Well, what book of his are you reading?" I said, "*Strait Is the Gate*. It's simply a terrific book. Have you read it?" He said, "No." I could tell from his tone that it was not the sort of thing he read or that he approved of my reading. My impression of Gide, looking back, is of an unsentimental and meticulous writer. I would say my attentions were not drawn to the wrong person.

INTERVIEWER

Are there other French writers who particularly influenced you?

SALTER

I've read a lot of them. Among those who are probably not widely read I would say Henry de Montherlant is particularly interesting. Céline is a dazzling writer. Here we have a disturbing case. Certain savage works of his have been stricken from the list. We know his views. The French almost executed him themselves. So we are talking about a dubious personage who is now deemed, I think correctly, as one of the two great writers of the century in France. It's a perfectly valid nomination. Even his last book, *Castle to Castle* is tremendous. It must have been written in the most trying circumstances imaginable. When you read something good, the idea of looking at television, going to a movie, or even reading a newspaper is not interesting to you. What you are reading is more seductive than all that. Céline has that quality.

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INTERVIEWER

What about Ford Madox Ford? I see a tonal similarity between *The Good Soldier*, which has been called "the best French novel in English," and *A Sport and a Pastime*.

SALTER

I admire Ford Madox Ford and probably never admired him more than when Hemingway thought he was cutting him to ribbons in *A Moveable Feast*. I don't know the details of his life. I do know that when he was a little boy he was counseled by an uncle, "Fordy, always help a lame dog over a stile." Ford behaved that way during his life. I just admire him greatly. He must have been in his late thirties when the First World War broke out and he volunteered and went and served. Along about that time, either just before or after—he had already written a number of books—he sat down to write *The Good Soldier*. He said it was time to sit down and show what he could do. I think that's wonderful and, of course, the book itself is not bad.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about Hemingway?

SALTER

I feel about Hemingway the way most people feel about Céline. He's a powerful writer, but personally, I find his character distasteful. I know a lot of people who met him—they all say he was wonderful. I don't think so. A nice thing about life is that you can rearrange the pantheon and demote certain figures you are dissatisfied with. It doesn't hurt anybody. So I've moved him down; he's gathering dust in the basement.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever think of what you're doing as revising or rethinking a Hemingway ethos?

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SALTER

I don't . . . I've never considered that. Of course, you never know what you're really doing, do you? Like a spider, you are in the middle of your own web. People have pointed out to me certain ideas and themes of Hemingway's in my writing. Each time I thought I was coming to it for the first time. There's a terrible temptation—I confess to it—that sometimes when you're sitting, trying to write something, you think, how would someone else do it? In the beginning I hadn't reached a point where I'd completely eliminated Hemingway from such consideration. You say, how would Yukio Mishima or John Berryman have written this, for instance? What kind of phrase would they use to describe such a thing? It opens the door to different approaches that might not be close at hand though you probably don't want to use them once you've thought of them. It's a weakness that arises when you are hesitant, when you cannot go on. Your mind wanders to these things.

INTERVIEWER

What about Henry Miller?

SALTER

Glorious writer. I would be very disappointed in a future, which is going to tell us which things are worth something and which aren't, that didn't treat him considerately. I find him irresistible. There are no distractions when you are reading Miller for the first time. I don't think you should read all his books—many are repetitious. Once you're in the thickets of *Sexus*, *Plexus*, *Nexus* and *Black Spring* you're staggering around as if people are beating you with newspapers, like a dog. But when you read *Tropic of Cancer*, you're reading a wonderful book. There's life, irreverence, esprit in it. I don't write anything like him. I can't. You'd have to *be* Miller, that's what's magnificent about it. It seems to me that when you read, what you are really listening for is the voice of the writer. That's more important than anything else. And it's

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Miller's voice, of course, which is the thing that makes you linger at his elbow until long past closing time, and you absolutely want to go home with him and keep talking, even though you know better.

INTERVIEWER

In "Winter of the Lion" you said that Irwin Shaw was the first writer of distinction you ever met—a father figure, a friend, an enormous voice. He seems an unlikely Vergil to your Dante.

SALTER

What I admired in him was he seemed to know how to behave. He was courageous. He embodied a lot of things that I respect, but perhaps hadn't explicitly put a name to before. I met him in the early 1960s, I believe. We rarely talked about books or writing, principally because he was overly generous, I thought, in his estimation of writers. He would frequently praise writers who might merely be good fellows or that he thought were decent. He was very prickly about his own work.

INTERVIEWER

His first *Paris Review* interview is one of the most pugnacious interviews I've ever read.

SALTER

He was that way, discussing his own things. You quickly learned that. We were sitting somewhere in Paris, which was where I first met him, and I questioned something about a story of his. Experience had not yet taught me whether to do this or not. Immediately his tone and general demeanor changed, and he said, "Well, they're all good stories," something to that effect. He said some people liked some of his stories and some liked others and that there had been stories that he thought were not particularly good that had gone on and won prizes, so how did one know? You said to yourself, let's skip this.

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INTERVIEWER

It seems as though you took from him not so much a model of how to write, but how to live as a writer.

SALTER

The income. The income.

INTERVIEWER

What did he talk about?

SALTER

He would drift into the past sometimes. I remember one night particularly when he was talking about the great moments of his life. He said something like the greatest moments of his life were being called onto the stage the night that *Bury the Dead* opened and the audience was shouting, "Author, author!" Another was the liberation of Paris. The third was catching a pass in a football game when he was playing for Brooklyn College years ago. There were some other things. Marian, his wife, was there, and I think his son, Adam. They probably felt a bit slighted, though they must have been used to it by that time. But I liked his categorization of things which were great.

INTERVIEWER

What did you mean when you said that he saw in you the arrogance of failure?

SALTER

He probably saw in me what one sees in any unrecognized but ambitious person.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of Shaw's designation that you were a lyric and he was a narrative writer?

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SALTER

Rather accurate. I've tried to rely less on lyricism because, having been stung by comment that it was unearned, I've come to the conclusion that I should pare down a bit, perhaps distill a bit more. That does have the effect of giving lyric things greater power.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever think of yourself as an expatriate writer?

SALTER

No. I have lived in Europe, the longest period when I was in the Air Force and stationed there, but we were visitors essentially. The other long period was living in Magagnosc, a little village down near Grasse. I went over because Harvey Swados suggested it. He was a charming man, very handsome, with a luxurious beard, a full head of hair, a wise face with generosity and intelligence shining from it. In a moment of candor, he once remarked that he possessed every quality of genius except talent. He had talent, but he didn't feel it was of the highest level. He had a sabbatical from Sarah Lawrence and was going to France for the year with his family. He said, why don't you come along, and in essence we said, why not? The village was one that Auguste Renoir had lived and worked in for a while, and the house was an old stone farmhouse that had been occupied the previous year by Robert Penn Warren and his wife, Eleanor Clark. I'd written and asked about the house and she wrote back and described it in some detail, the views of the sea, the goat that came with the house, the eucalyptus trees. The description was perfect and she concluded by saying, "You will have the most wonderful year of your life if you don't freeze to death." There was no heat in the place. And so we went to France for a year-and-a-half, but with no intention of remaining there. John Collier had a house in the vicinity and we became friends, too. Expatriate is too serious a word.

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INTERVIEWER

There are American writers who go abroad, to Europe, and become more entrenched as Americans, like Hawthorne and Twain, and those who long to fit in and become more European. How do you see yourself?

SALTER

Completely American. But I admire European ways.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of yourself as a late bloomer?

SALTER

More or less. I'm hoping that a few green sprigs are still going to appear.

INTERVIEWER

It seems as if your experiences in the military totally propelled your first two books, *The Hunters* and *The Arm of Flesh*.

SALTER

The first two books, yes. Things that have come afterward, not much. There's only one short story that has anything to do with the military, and now this memoir that I'm writing has chapters about the military. I was in for twelve years, thirteen if you count being recalled, and a lot of things happened in that time.

INTERVIEWER

Did you learn anything from flying that helped you in writing?

SALTER

The time flying, that didn't count. It's like the famous eight or ten working in the shoe store. You deduct that from your literary career.

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INTERVIEWER

You began writing in your mid-thirties. That's a late start, isn't it?

SALTER

Well, I began publishing in my mid-thirties. I was writing before that.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start?

SALTER

I wrote as a schoolboy. I was able to devote a little time to it when I was in the Air Force. In 1946 and 1947 I wrote a novel, and it was terrible. I didn't realize that then. Harper Brothers turned it down, but said they would be interested in seeing anything else I wrote. That was enough encouragement. I wanted to write another book anyway, and when I did, I submitted it to them, and they accepted it. That was *The Hunters*, the first thing I had published.

INTERVIEWER

What was it that kicked in that got you writing that first novel?

SALTER

It was an impulse I had from the beginning. I didn't know what made me write at the beginning, but later I understood. It's simple: the one who writes it keeps it. I suppose I felt that, though I wouldn't have been able to say it.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about those first two books now?

SALTER

Youth.

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INTERVIEWER

You've spoken about your military experiences as the great days of youth when you were mispronouncing words and believing dreams. It must have been difficult for you to resign your commission in 1957 in order to make your way as a writer.

SALTER

I've managed to forget how difficult it was. I do remember when I heard my resignation had been accepted. We were in Washington with a young child in a borrowed apartment that looked out over the city. It was night, and there it was spread beneath me the way Paris is spread beneath you when you see it for the first time. Everything that meant anything to me, the Pentagon, Georgetown, flying out of Andrews, everything I had done in life up to that point, I was throwing away. I felt absolutely miserable—miserable and a failure.

INTERVIEWER

I've heard that you said, "write or perish."

SALTER

Yes, it was one or the other. I wanted to be a writer, but on the other hand I had given everything to this other. I wasn't a rebellious officer. I had given everything, and I had gotten a lot in return. It was precisely like divorce. The sort of divorce where two decent people simply cannot get along with one another; it's not a question of either of them being at fault; they just can't continue. And if they've been married for a while and have children and everything else that's involved, it's difficult. That's how it felt. I knew I had to get divorced, but I wasn't happy about it. I was very apprehensive about the future, what lay beyond.

INTERVIEWER

The painter in the story "Lost Sons" is certainly an outsider, but he feels a residual nostalgia for the military life he might have had. Do you still feel that?

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SALTER

Well, there are moments, as the poet said, when the blind captain dreams of the sea. When the geese fly over in the autumn you think of it, but that's all long gone. That sawed-off limb has grown over and healed.

INTERVIEWER

"That person in the army, that wasn't me," John Cheever wrote after the war, but you didn't feel that.

SALTER

No, like many prisoners, you come to love the prison and the other inmates. Cheever simply hadn't paid enough to have that feeling.

INTERVIEWER

If you could choose to be remembered by two books of your own, which two would you choose?

SALTER

I would think *A Sport and a Pastime* and *Light Years*.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first start writing *A Sport and a Pastime*?

SALTER

The first notes for it probably in 1961; I began seriously writing it in 1964 or 1965.

INTERVIEWER

Where were you?

SALTER

At that time, I had a studio in the Village. We were living in the suburbs, and I went into the city to work.

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INTERVIEWER

Was it dislocating to be living in New York and writing about France?

SALTER

Not particularly. It takes a few moments perhaps to disassociate yourself from quotidian life, but afterwards you are completely with the book. In any case, my method is to go in with a lot of ammunition. I had a lot of notes.

INTERVIEWER

It's almost as if in writing that book a cluster of notions or terms came together at once, about sensuality and eroticism, food and alcohol, the landscape and culture of France?

SALTER

I suppose so. Despite what I said earlier, the cities of Europe were my real manhood. I first saw them in 1950. Apart from New York, a bit of Washington and Honolulu, I had lived in no other cities, and Europe's were a revelation to me. I liked living in them. I like Europe because the days don't punish you there.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder how you came up with the title, which is taken from the Koran.

SALTER

I've read the Koran, but I saw the phrase in an article.

INTERVIEWER

The narrator treats "green bourgeoise France" as a secular holy land. That part seems autobiographical.

SALTER

It's possible not to like France. I know that Kerouac, whom I knew slightly, went to Paris once and came back after a

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couple of days with the memorable comment that Paris "had rejected him." But he's an anomaly. If your eyes are open, you will see how attractive France can be.

INTERVIEWER

When *A Sport and a Pastime* came out you were hailed as "celebrating the rites of erotic innovation" and yet also criticized for portraying such "vigorous 'love' scenes." What did you think of all that?

SALTER

The eroticism is the heart and substance of the book. That seems obvious. I meant it to be, to use a word of Lorca's, "lubricious" but pure, to describe things that were unspeakable in one sense, but at the same time, irresistible. Having traveled, I also was aware that voyages are, in a large sense, a search for, a journey toward love. A voyage without that is rather sterile. Perhaps this is a masculine view, but I think not entirely. The idea is of a life that combines sex and architecture—I suppose that's what the book is, but that doesn't explain it. It's more or less a guide to what life might be, an ideal.

INTERVIEWER

People seem to have different opinions of what the book is about.

SALTER

I listen occasionally to people explaining the book to me. Every few years there's an inquiry from a producer who would like to make a movie of it. I've turned the offers down because it seems to me ridiculous to try and film it. To my mind the book *is* obvious. I don't see the ambiguity, but there again, you don't know precisely what you are writing. Besides, how can you explain your own work? It's vanity. To me it seems you can understand the book, if there's been any doubt, by reading the final paragraph:

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> As for Anne-Marie, she lives in Troyes now, or did. She is married. I suppose there are children. They walk together on Sundays, the sunlight falling upon them. They visit friends, talk, go home in the evening, deep in the life we all agree is so greatly to be desired.

That paragraph, the final sentence, is written in irony, but perhaps not read that way. If you don't see the irony, then the book is naturally going to have a different meaning for you.

INTERVIEWER

It has been said that Dean's desire for Anne-Marie is also a desire for the "real" France. It's a linked passion.

SALTER

France is beautiful, but his desire is definitely for the girl herself. Of course she is an embodiment. Even when you recognize what she is, she evokes things. But she would be desirable to him even if she didn't.

INTERVIEWER

There's a post-modern side to the book. The narrator indicates that he's inventing Dean and Anne-Marie out of his own inadequacies.

SALTER

That's just camouflage.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean?

SALTER

This book would have been difficult to write in the first person—that is to say if it were Dean's voice. It would be quite interesting written from Anne-Marie's voice, but I wouldn't know how to attempt that. On the other hand, if

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it were in the third person, the historic third, so to speak, it would be a little disturbing because of the explicitness, the sexual descriptions. The question was how to paint this, more or less. I don't recall how it came to me, but the idea of having a third person describe it, somebody who is really not an important part of the book but merely serving as an intermediary between the book and the reader, was perhaps the thing that was going to make it possible; and consequently, I did that. I don't know who this narrator is. You could say it's me; well, possibly. But truly, there is no such person. He's a device. He's like the figure in black that moves the furniture in a play, so to speak, essential, but not part of the action.

INTERVIEWER

He's like a narrator on a stage.

SALTER

Exactly. He stands in front of the curtain.

INTERVIEWER

It gives an almost voyeuristic feel to the novel.

SALTER

But that's its appeal, don't you think? I'm speaking of voyeurism not in the sense of being satisfied to look at life and not act in it. I'm speaking in the Peeping Tom sense, which is immensely exciting. You are seeing something forbidden, something absolutely natural and unrehearsed; someone unaware of being observed. As we know from physics, observed things are not the same as unobserved things. So, I like the idea.

INTERVIEWER

Is it possible to say how much of the book is invented and how much is real?

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SALTER

Well, I've been to France, and I've been to Autun, and I do know people like that. I usually write, if I can, by preparing some things in advance. I don't like to step on the podium, as it were, with nothing. There are performers who can do that, but I can't. So when I sit down to write a page, I like to have some things that I've thought up in advance. And for a book, a lot of things. I'd jotted down a lot of things before I wrote that book and some were from life; some of them were quasi-life; a few were invented.

INTERVIEWER

Light Years is an epiphanic book; in a way, like *A Sport and a Pastime*. It consists of a series of luminous moments.

SALTER

In *Light Years*, these moments, let's say these scenes, are themselves the narrative. They serve as the narrative. *A Sport and a Pastime* has erotic moments which overshade everything else and in a way comprise the book. Perhaps it's the same method in both.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think *Light Years* is truly about?

SALTER

The book is the worn stones of conjugal life. All that is beautiful, all that is plain, everything that nourishes or causes to wither. It goes on for years, decades, and in the end seems to have passed like things glimpsed from the train—a meadow here, a stand of trees, houses with lit windows in the dusk, darkened towns, stations flashing by—everything that is not written down disappears except for certain imperishable moments, people and scenes. The animals die, the house is sold, the children are grown, even the couple itself has vanished, and yet there is this poem. It was criticized as elitist, but I'm not sure this is so. The two of them are really rather unexcep-

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tional. She was beautiful, but that passed; he was devoted, but not strong enough really to hold onto life. The title was originally *Nedra and Viri*—in my books, the woman is always the stronger. If you can believe this book, and it *is* true, there is a dense world built on matrimony, a life enclosed, as it says, in ancient walls. It is about the sweetness of those unending days.

INTERVIEWER

One critic said that life's imperfections or impurities are rarely illumined in your fiction. That seems patently wrong to me, although there is a struggle for perfection in the lives of the characters, but it's a surface perfection, isn't it?

SALTER

Well, it's only shallow people who do not judge by appearances, as Wilde said. Frivolous, but it touches an important question of the times which is the relation of appearance to substance, of the perceived to the true.

INTERVIEWER

I've read that the notion behind *Light Years* came from a remark by Jean Renoir.

SALTER

"The only things that are important in life are the things you remember." Yes, I like that idea. I came across it after I was working on the book. But no matter, it authenticated something I felt. I wanted to compose a book of those things that one remembers in life. That was the notion. I suppose that the plot of the book is the passage of time and what it does to people and things. Perfectly obvious again, but combining those two ideas gave me the feeling of what the book should be. That still doesn't displease. I find it satisfying.

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INTERVIEWER

Viri, in the book, seems deeply dependent on the love of a woman for his happiness. It's the sanctuary for his feeling. Nedra, on the other hand, seems happiest when she's apart from men.

SALTER

Women are stronger in this as well as other regards. Women can graze and be happy, but men have no object other than women.

INTERVIEWER

At one point Viri says, "There are really two kinds of life. There is the one people believe you're living and there is the other. It is this other which causes the trouble, that other we long to see."

SALTER

Isn't this like that very small book that Poe said could never be written: *My Heart Laid Bare*. There is a socially acceptable, let us say, conventional life that we live and discuss and pretty much adhere to, and there is the other life which is the life of thought, fantasy, and desire that is not openly discussed. I'm sure, the times being what they are, there are people who do talk about it and probably on television, but in general, in most lives, these two things are completely distinct. I am conscious of them and attempted to write a little about it.

INTERVIEWER

The cover of the North Point edition features Bonnard's painting "The Breakfast Room." That painting seems to capture the atmosphere of the novel.

SALTER

I sometimes write thinking of a certain painter, and I wrote *Light Years* thinking of Bonnard from the very beginning. He is a painter of intimacy and solitude, he was not part of

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any school, and his life was spent, generally speaking, away from the brilliance of the lights and out of the mainstream. Not only his pictures but his persona appealed to me.

INTERVIEWER

There was an enormous leap in subject matter from *Light Years* to *Solo Faces*. What happened?

SALTER

Solo Faces was not a book I thought of myself. It has a different paternity. I was asked to write it. I had written a script about the same people, not quite the same series of events or details. Robert Ginna, a very close friend and then editor-in-chief of Little Brown, liked the script and asked me if I wouldn't write it as a novel. At first I was uninterested but he persuaded me to do it. That explains why it seems a bit off my beaten path.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder how it changed from script to novel?

SALTER

It had to be considerably more realized as a novel. The central figure is based on a real man, Gary Hemming, who was a climber in the 1960s, very well-known. He was one of those figures that friends and people came into contact with and never quite forgot. His background is somewhat mysterious. I did a lot of research on it, including reading his letters. He was a lone wolf and somewhat offhanded in his actions, but he handled his correspondence very carefully. I had a pretty fair idea what he was like from interviewing his friends and from reading. Major events in the book are based on events in Hemming's life. He did lead a remarkable rescue on the Dru. He was in *Paris Match*; he became famous. He was dead by the time I thought of writing about him. Actually, the thing that persuaded me to do it was a piece of film that had been on French television. It was about ten minutes long,

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an interview with Hemming. In it he was sitting in a meadow near Chamonix in a long winter undershirt, and when I saw him I suddenly realized what everyone had been talking about. There was this quality in him that was remarkable. He was a bit like Gary Cooper, to go to the commonplace, in the honesty of his face. There was something about him that was speaking to you from the center of his being. When I saw those ten minutes I became intrigued by the idea and felt that I could write about it.

INTERVIEWER

If Hemming is a model for Rand, I wonder if you had a model for Cabot?

SALTER

Oh yes. John Harlan was the other climber, the companion and rival. We didn't know one another, but we were pilots in Germany at the same time. He died on the Eiger.

INTERVIEWER

How fully did you rely on your own experiences of mountain climbing?

SALTER

Some. I always took a pencil and notebook with me, but I rarely made a note. I was far too occupied. What I heard, being with climbers, the confessions and anecdotes, was more important to me. I climbed with Royal Robbins, who was and probably remains the most important moral force in American climbing. I went to Europe with him, and Yosemite. He was a stern, somewhat laconic figure, but very decent to me. One time we climbed something, not particularly trying for him, of course, but terrible for me. We were going up a pair of cracks and had to traverse over to another pair. The traverse was probably six or seven feet. You could almost span it with your arms. He went across—he was leading, of course—and then it came my turn. It was at the very limit of my abilities.

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I remember the moment well because I was looking down—height at that time was still a consideration to me—and I thought, I'm not going to make this, I'm going to fall here. That wasn't so alarming—we were roped—but what was really causing despair was the thought that after falling I was going to have climb up and do it again anyway. That evening we were having a drink, and I told him what I had felt. I asked him if he ever felt anguish of that kind in climbing. All the time, he said. I felt he was telling me the truth.

INTERVIEWER

What do you remember most emphatically about climbing?

SALTER

That you come to these places and say to yourself, I can't do this, I know I can't do this, I'm certain I can't do it, but I have to do it, I know I have to. You would give anything to be somewhere besides there, but there's no use thinking about it. You have to go on. In the end it uplifts you somehow.

INTERVIEWER

The stories in *Dusk* were written over a fairly long period of time, but there are some persistent concerns and structures. What's your idea of a short story?

SALTER

Above all, it must be compelling. You're sitting around the campfire of literature, so to speak, and various voices speak up out of the dark and begin talking. With some, your mind wanders or you doze off, but with others you are held by every word. The first line, the first sentence, the first paragraph, all have to compel you.

Further, I think, it should be memorable. It must have significance. Merely because something has been written is not adequate justification for it. A story doesn't have to surprise—Mishima's "Patriotism" disdains surprise. It needn't be dramatic—Peter Taylor's "A Wife of Nashville" has no drama.

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What it must do is somehow astonish you, and what it must be is somehow complete.

INTERVIEWER

Who is your favorite short-story writer?

SALTER

I would say Isaac Babel. He has the three essentials of greatness: style, structure and authority. There are other writers who have that, of course—Hemingway, in fact, had those three things. But Babel particularly appeals to me because of the added element of his life, which seems to me to give his work an additional poignancy. He lived in difficult times; he was murdered in the end by the State. He disappeared in the camps. We don't know what happened to him. He was the one who said, "I wasn't given time to finish." I've always been surprised that he hasn't had more recognition here. Of all the stories I have read, the greatest number that are near the top come from Babel and Chekhov.

INTERVIEWER

I've heard you say that Babel was a hero in the world.

SALTER

He is heroic to me. My idea of writing is of unflinching and continual effort, somehow trying to find the right words until you reach a point where you can make no further progress and you either have something or you don't. Babel was such a writer. He worked on manuscripts for a long time; there was a trunk full of them that just disappeared with work in it that he simply wasn't ready to have printed yet. His remarks, those that have been translated—various speeches or talks at symposiums between about 1930 and 1936—give you the impression of someone who is not without confidence, but by no means arrogant or proud. He said at one point that he wished he had never taken up anything as difficult as writing but instead had become a tractor salesman like his father. At

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the same time you know that in the final account it's not what he was going to do. He made a remark about Tolstoy that is very touching. He observed that Tolstoy only weighed three poods—a Russian weight measurement—but that they were three poods of pure genius.

INTERVIEWER

There's something about Babel's work that strikes me as similar to yours. In Babel there's a terrific sensitivity that is shaped or meets the forge of cossack military conduct.

SALTER

I suppose you tend to take as models and admire people you are able to feel close to in a certain way. I feel many of the things I believe he felt. I would say the difference is that Babel rode with the cossacks; I was one.

INTERVIEWER

Is Babel's argot something that has influenced you?

SALTER

You mean the unexpected slangy word, like a knuckleball. I steer away from it because a master, Saul Bellow, has appropriated that. Perhaps that's unfair—he may have come upon it himself, but in any case, it's similar to Babel's and you don't want to be the third party.

INTERVIEWER

What's your favorite book of Bellow's?

SALTER

Henderson the Rain King is a book that if you make a little tick beside things worth noting, you'll end up with page after page of them. It's a spectacular performance. Bellow once urged me to write about the horse country in Virginia. It was when I was telling him about my wife's family and my

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land-owning father-in-law. I told him I didn't know enough about the horse country in Virginia to write anything, I'd only been there a dozen times. Then he amazed me. He said, "Yes, well, I'd never been to Africa when I wrote *Henderson*."

INTERVIEWER

Almost all of your stories have been published in *The Paris Review*, *Esquire* and *Grand Street*.

SALTER

I've responded in some cases to invitation. Rust Hills at *Esquire* has been very encouraging; Ben Sonnenberg when he edited *Grand Street* was a wonderful editor. And of course *The Paris Review* published my first three or four stories, and George Plimpton also published *A Sport and a Pastime* when he first started Paris Review Editions. Although I have never managed to appear on the masthead, which has innumerable people on it, I feel I am a member of the family.

INTERVIEWER

What about *The New Yorker*?

SALTER

I've never had a story in *The New Yorker*; everything has been rejected. At one point I came close. I had written a story called "Via Negativa," and I had a note from Roger Angell who said, please come in to talk about it. I sat in a little gray office with him, and he told me that he liked the story very much. He said, "This is really quite good, but I'm afraid we can't take it." I was stunned. I said, "Why is that?" He said, "At *The New Yorker* we have two rules we never violate. The first is that we never publish anything with obscenity in it. Second, we never publish any stories about writers or writing." I hardly knew what to say. "What about the Bech stories by Updike?" I asked. He said, "Well, that's another matter." A year or two later I was talking to Saul Bellow about this, and he said, "I tried to get them to publish a section of *The Victim*,

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but they didn't accept it. They said they had two rules that they never violated. One, they never published anything that had obscenity in it. Two, they never published anything about death or dying."

INTERVIEWER

What do you think is your best short story?

SALTER

I like "American Express." It's the most recent story, and I think the most accomplished. It has a lot of levels. It is not simply what it appears. I like that aspect of it. It has a certain reach that I respond to, and I like the ending. Lastly, it's about lawyers, which is something I wanted to write about for a long time.

INTERVIEWER

What was the first story you ever wrote?

SALTER

The first published story was "Am Strande von Tanger," and, oddly enough, that's probably the one I like next best. What I like about that story is it seems to be very carefully observed. When one reads it, I think there is the feeling of yes, this is exactly so, this is exactly how it was. I admire that in others.

INTERVIEWER

One of the things that figures into your fiction is money. Or maybe it is the absence of money that sometimes crushes your characters.

SALTER

I think the major axis of life is a sexual one. You know—the music changes but the dance is always the same. You could easily say, however, that wealth and poverty are an axis, and

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of course in America we have magnified that. We make no distinction between status and money. The real event of the 1980s was not the national debt or self-indulgence or any of these things; it was the emergence of great looting fortunes, the likes of which we hadn't seen for a hundred years and which threw the moral equilibrium completely out of balance and made us revise the value of everything—not to the benefit of society, though of course society will heal itself. And with of all that money, how pathetic that none could be found for a distinguished publishing house like North Point Press, to allow it to go on as it had. Well, what can you expect?

INTERVIEWER

It's struck me how often the deaths or failures of artists—Gaudí, Mahler—figure in your work.

SALTER

We were talking about the dissatisfaction of poets, their feeling that the culture, the nation, did not give them the honor or respect they deserved, though half of that comes afterwards. Ours is a culture that enshrines the ephemeral, and that leaves certain things and people out. The deepest instinct, I think, is to want to do something enduring, something worthwhile, and to be engaged by that, whether one achieves it or not . . . So perhaps that's how artists figure in.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever written poetry?

SALTER

I wrote it in school, and I've written it episodically after that. I like brevity, the power of names.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if poets in particular have influenced you as a writer?

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SALTER

Very much. You have to like Berryman; you have to like Lorca, Larkin, Pound. The *Cantos*, unfathomable, a lot of it. When I was a child in school, we were made to stand up, at the rear of the class as I recall, and recite poems we had memorized. That anthology stays with one, even though it's largely just of verse. Like the shreds of popular songs and advertisements, they stay with you the rest of your life, you simply can't get rid of them. Then there were poets one was taught in English class. Keats and Shelley—I never liked them, possibly because we were instructed to admire them. I liked Byron, Tennyson . . . there's a simple sort of schoolboy poet. I remember Housman fondly. I said, ah, now here's a poet that strikes my nature, and I like his language. I've since learned that Housman is not that important but I still have an affection for him as you do for someone you knew when you were young. You realize that perhaps your feelings were impetuous.

INTERVIEWER

Pound had the idea of structuring the *Cantos* around luminous moments. That doesn't seem far from what you were after in some of the novels.

SALTER

No, it doesn't.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder when Nabokov became an influence on your work.

SALTER

Oh, I forgot to mention him. Admirable writer. One of a kind. When did he write *Speak, Memory*? I read chapters in *The New Yorker* and was struck immediately by the voice. Of course, here's a poet. You say to yourself, Vladimir, let's be honest. You are a poet, and you're just writing a lot of prose. It's quite good, but we know what you're really interested in.

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Speak, Memory seems to me eminently that kind of book. I think, all in all, it's his best. The first half of *Lolita* is very strong. *Pale Fire*, Mary McCarthy's favorite, is quite a strong book as well. However, *Speak, Memory* is indelible. It can be read and reread. The notions in it, the leaps of imagination and the language are essentially poetic. When I first read him I said to myself, well, you might as well quit. But you forget about that after a while.

INTERVIEWER

He spoke of combining the passion of the scientist with the precision of the poet. I wonder if you feel that he has influenced you at the stylistic level?

SALTER

I don't have his nimble kind of mind. It would be useless for me to attempt to dance by putting my feet in his chalkmarks on the floor, but I find him inspirational.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't you interview him?

SALTER

It happened that one of the first pieces of journalism I did was an interview with Nabokov. They said, first of all, he only gives written interviews. You must send in your questions in advance. So I sat down and wrote ten we assume penetrating questions, which I wouldn't like to see again, and sent them to him. No response, of course. But it was arranged that if I went to Europe I would be able to meet and talk to him. I reached Europe and was in Paris, it was in the winter, and I was in one of those hotels where they still had telephones with a separate piece you held to your ear, the old French phones. I got hold of the *Time* man in Geneva who had arranged the meeting with Nabokov, and he gave me the distressing news that the interview was called off. Nabokov had changed his mind. I said, "How can he do that? I've come to Europe."

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"Well, he's called it off." I didn't know what to do. He said, "Why don't you call him?" The idea was unthinkable. It was like somebody saying why don't you call the Pope? There seemed to be no alternative, so I called. A voice said, "Montreux Palace Hotel," and I said, "Mr. Nabokov, please." The phone was ringing and, of course, I didn't know what I was going to say. A woman answered. It was Vera Nabokov. I explained who I was and what had happened. She said, "Oh no, my husband can't do an interview. He's not well. You must submit your questions in writing." I told her I had done that but there had been no response, and she repeated that he answered only in writing. "I must tell you," she said, "my husband does not ad lib." Nevertheless, I asked if she would not, since I had come to Europe, be good enough to see if he wouldn't give me a few moments, merely so I had a physical impression, some description to add to the answers. She put the phone down, and I pictured her just looking out the window for a moment and then picking it up again and saying, "I'm sorry, he can't." But she surprised me by coming back and saying, "My husband will meet you at five o'clock on Sunday afternoon in the Green Bar of the Montreux Palace." She repeated the date and time to be sure it was understood.

At five o'clock on Sunday, the elevator door opened, and out stepped a tall, blazered, gray-trousered man whom I instantly recognized, and a white-haired woman in a handsome Rodier suit. It was the Nabokovs. They came to the table. I was a little nervous. I was not an accomplished journalist; I knew Nabokov did not ad lib; I was unable to bring a tape recorder because of that, and I would be unable to take notes, I knew, for the same reason. I had as my only source of strength the, I am certain, fabrication of Truman Capote that he had spent a night drinking and talking with Marlon Brando in Tokyo and the next day had written down the entire conversation exactly. It appeared in *The New Yorker*. I thought if Capote could do it for an entire night while drinking I could certainly do thirty abstemious minutes with Nabokov. I summoned all my powers and said I'm going to concentrate on everything

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he says, listen and not think of being clever or what I should say; I simply want to listen to him. It turned out to be about forty-five minutes. We were getting along quite well, and finally he said, "Shall we have another julep?" He was referring whimsically to scotch and soda. But I was afraid that one more drink might begin to obliterate the text. So I excused myself. I had the distinct impression we could have gone on and had dinner, but I was afraid to. I apologized for having taken up so much time and immediately went to the railroad station where I wrote down everything I remembered. It wasn't in order, of course, but it was four or five pages, and from it I constructed an interview. It was all fairly exact, I must say. I missed the train, but I cherish the memory.

INTERVIEWER

Did you interview others as part of a journalistic career?

SALTER

Well, a brief career. I interviewed Graham Greene, Antonia Fraser, Han Suyin.

INTERVIEWER

How did Greene strike you?

SALTER

I've nothing but admiration for Greene. In his case I took the trouble to read all his books since I knew very little about him, and that alone made it worth it. Afterwards he wrote me a number of letters mainly distinguished by their brevity, though they were cordial, and also by his signature, a more minuscule piece of handwriting than I have ever seen since. It was as if they were signed by a mere horizontal line. He had asked me if I was a journalist, I'm not sure if it was curiosity or incredulity. I said no, like him, I was a writer and I'd written some novels. He told me to send him one, and I sent *Light Years*. He wrote back and said, "I found your book to be very moving, and three pages of it are absolutely masterly." He

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cited the pages. I went immediately to the book. I turned to those pages and, for various reasons, because of the way the lines fell, and also the flavor of the text, it turned out that all three had a faintly Graham Greeneish tone to them.

But he was kind. He wanted to know if the book had been published in England. I said no, it had been turned down by publishers there. He said, "Has it been submitted to The Bodley Head?" He had a close connection to them. I believe his brother was one of the directors of the house. Yes, I said, but The Bodley had turned it down. He said, "What reason did they give?" I said they felt it would not make any money if they published it. He said, "That's no reason not to publish a book. Let me inquire." He arranged for them to publish it, which they did, and they had been right—but, of course, he was, also.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about your journalistic work as a whole?

SALTER

It was a way to earn a living.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about your career as a screenwriter?

SALTER

In the 1950s the European directors suddenly burst onto the scene: Truffaut, Fellini, Antonioni, Godard. They seemed to cast a new light on the whole idea of movies. The New York Film Festival started sometime in the mid-sixties. All of it was seductive. It was like the band marching by, the flags, the beat of drums, and of course at that period of life I felt I could write anything: a sonnet, a libretto, a play. Someone came along and said, how would you like to write a movie? And it proceeded from there.

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INTERVIEWER

Your movie "Three," based on an Irwin Shaw short story, met with a lot of success at the Cannes Film Festival. Did that surprise you?

SALTER

It was a pleasant surprise. Finally, though, it was like everything I've done. It had its admirers, some of them ardent, but on the other hand, the public displayed complete indifference. It was described somewhere, or perhaps I described it, as being essentially a movie about meals and wine. That's perhaps not true, but I now see I was somewhat inadequate as a director. I should have spent considerably more time with the actors and the psychology of what was going on.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have strong ambitions to be an *auteur*?

SALTER

Yes, that's what everybody wanted to be.

INTERVIEWER

You spent about ten years in and out of the movie business, but seem to have a lot of disdain for it now.

SALTER

One earns that.

INTERVIEWER

Do you regret the time?

SALTER

Not completely. I saw the inside of a lot of places I wouldn't have otherwise.

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INTERVIEWER

Was it liberating to decide that you wouldn't work with movies any longer?

SALTER

It wasn't abrupt. I just said I would like to do less of this. I would like to do much less. I would like to do none of it.

INTERVIEWER

Was journalism a better alternative?

SALTER

The wage scale is not exactly the same. Movie writers, as Lorenzo Semple and I agree, are among the most overpaid people on earth. In a certain sense you would do a movie for nothing, just for the fun of doing it. In addition to that, you are lavishly paid.

INTERVIEWER

Is it cancer-causing to write movies?

SALTER

Movies are essentially meant to be distractions. It's a very rare movie that has the power to console. Whether you get cancer or not is hard to say. There are figures like Graham Greene . . . I think the movies caused him no harm, and he worked in them extensively. There are people like John Sayles who are both novelists and full-time directors and who seem to survive it. But generally speaking, they come with the bill eventually. If you have been writing movies you have been accommodating other people.

A movie is a single performance, and it's remembered as a performance. Movies are never re-performed. They are not alive. They are sometimes remade years later, but everything in them is absolutely fixed and will always be fixed. They are not like great prose, which, as one critic pointed out, seems to catch fire first in one place and then in another. I tend to

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talk about them disrespectfully, but no matter what is said they have assumed the paramount position in American culture. They are unquestionably the enemy of writing, and this is something that is unresolvable. That is the way it is. I talk to writing students occasionally, and naturally that's the first thing they're interested in. I even speak to accomplished writers and writing teachers whose dream is to write a movie. We know why they have this dream. Part of it is the money, part of it is walking into a crowded restaurant with a famous actor . . . perhaps it's the same feeling one gets traveling with the president. The illusion is of some kind of authenticity. But by and large it all disappears, and the time you've spent doing that, if you are interested in writing, is wasted time.

INTERVIEWER

Is writing a memoir the sign of coming to a certain age?

SALTER

They say you should do it in your white-haired youth. I may have waited a bit long.

INTERVIEWER

Is there an impulse to rethink the experiences of the past?

SALTER

I feel the joy is in thinking about what happened and what it really meant and being able to make that come to life. There is the whole question of truth. You are perfectly entitled to invent your life and to claim that it's true. We have had the blurring of fact and fiction already. We've had writers who have explained that their books are nonfiction novels, that is to say, nonfiction fictions. I subscribe to a more classic view. I believe there is such a thing as objective truth insofar as we are given to know it. Victor Hugo's *Choses vues* is an example. No one can know God's truth, but it's not God's truth you're writing; it's truth as you know it—things that you have observed. I am fallible; we all are. There may be some errors in

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it, but they are not errors of commission or of carelessness. They are simply errors that crept in unknown.

INTERVIEWER

I noticed *Out of Africa* on your desk. What did you mean when you praised Isak Dinesen "for the courage she had in what she omitted" from that book?

SALTER

I take that book to be a model. As you know, she had a husband who gave her syphilis; she had a childhood, a marriage; she had a love affair; one senses—I haven't read her biography—a tremendous amount happened to her. None of it is in this story, *Out of Africa*. Her husband is briefly mentioned, so is her father. So are many other figures. One has a very strong feeling about this woman and her life. You feel you know her. And yet she was not obliged, so to speak, to lift her skirts, display the sheets. I admire that. I thought it would be interesting to write a book that tells some important things but doesn't bother to tell every detail.

INTERVIEWER

You've written that after you returned to domestic life you eventually stopped talking about your war days, but now you're writing about them.

SALTER

There was no point in talking about war days. Who was there to talk to about them? Someone at a party telling you about being over Ploesti or what he did in Vietnam usually trivializes it. You have to have the right audience. Also, when you write about it you have the opportunity to arrange it exactly the way you would like, and one presumes that the reader is going to be enthralled.

INTERVIEWER

But why a memoir?

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SALTER

To restore those years when one says: All this is mine—these cities, women, houses, days.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think is the ultimate impulse to write?

SALTER

To write? Because all this is going to vanish. The only thing left will be the prose and poems, the books, what is written down. Man was very fortunate to have invented the book. Without it the past would completely vanish, and we would be left with nothing, we would be naked on earth.

—**Edward Hirsch**

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Portfolio

Blackboard Series

Gary Simmons

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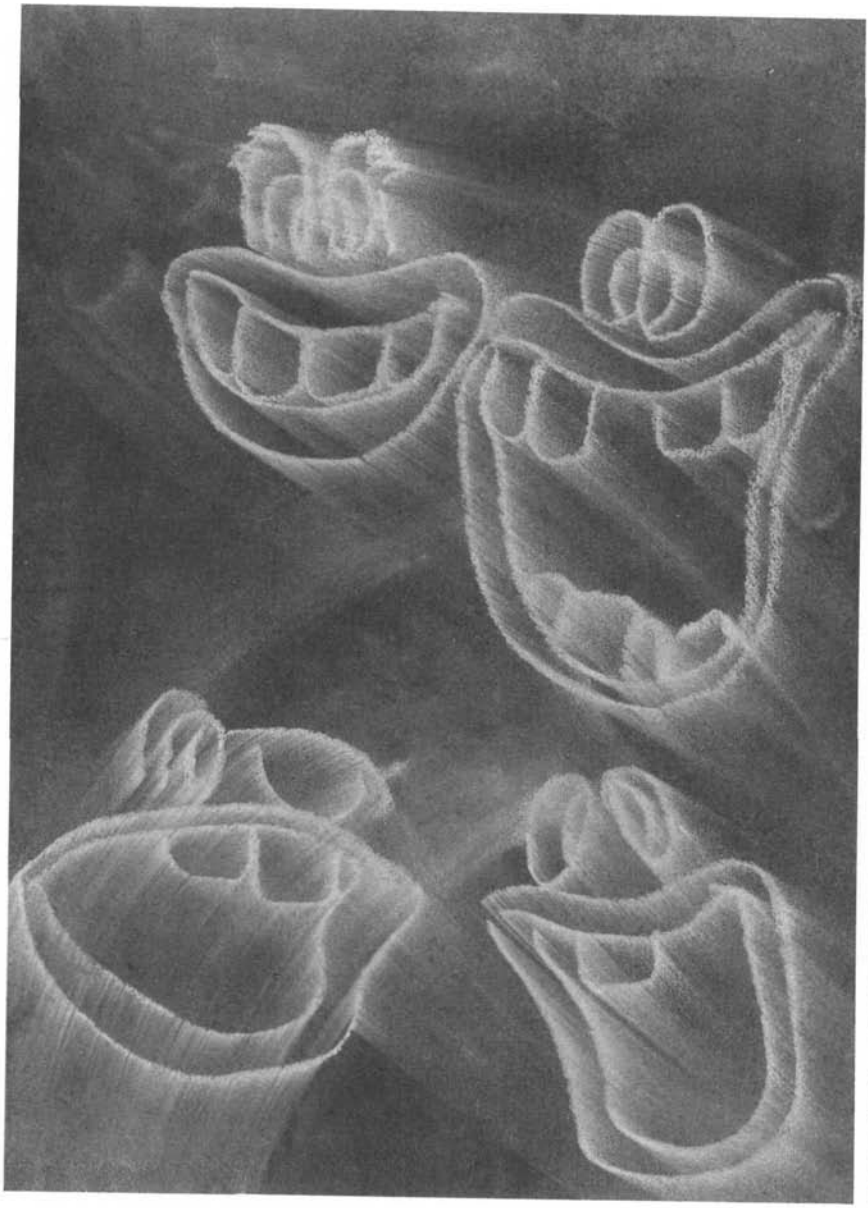

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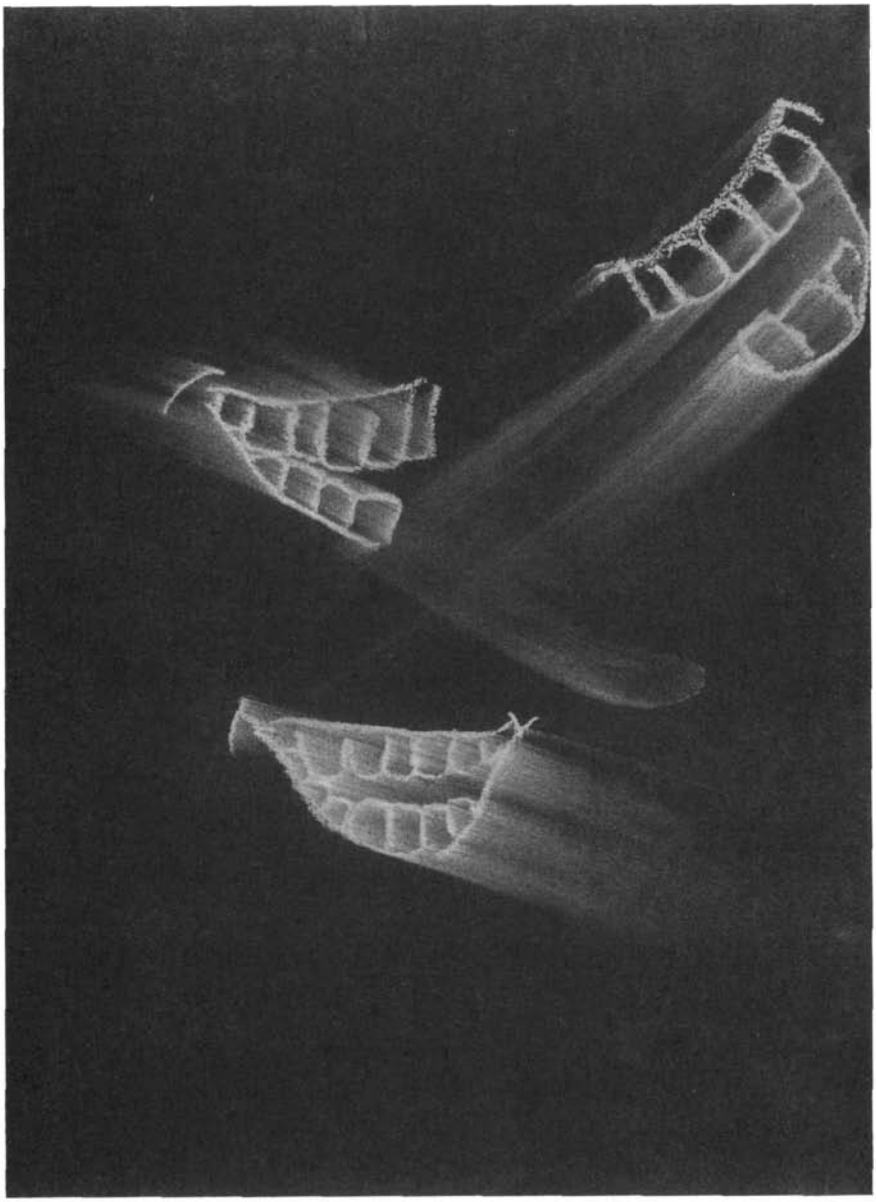

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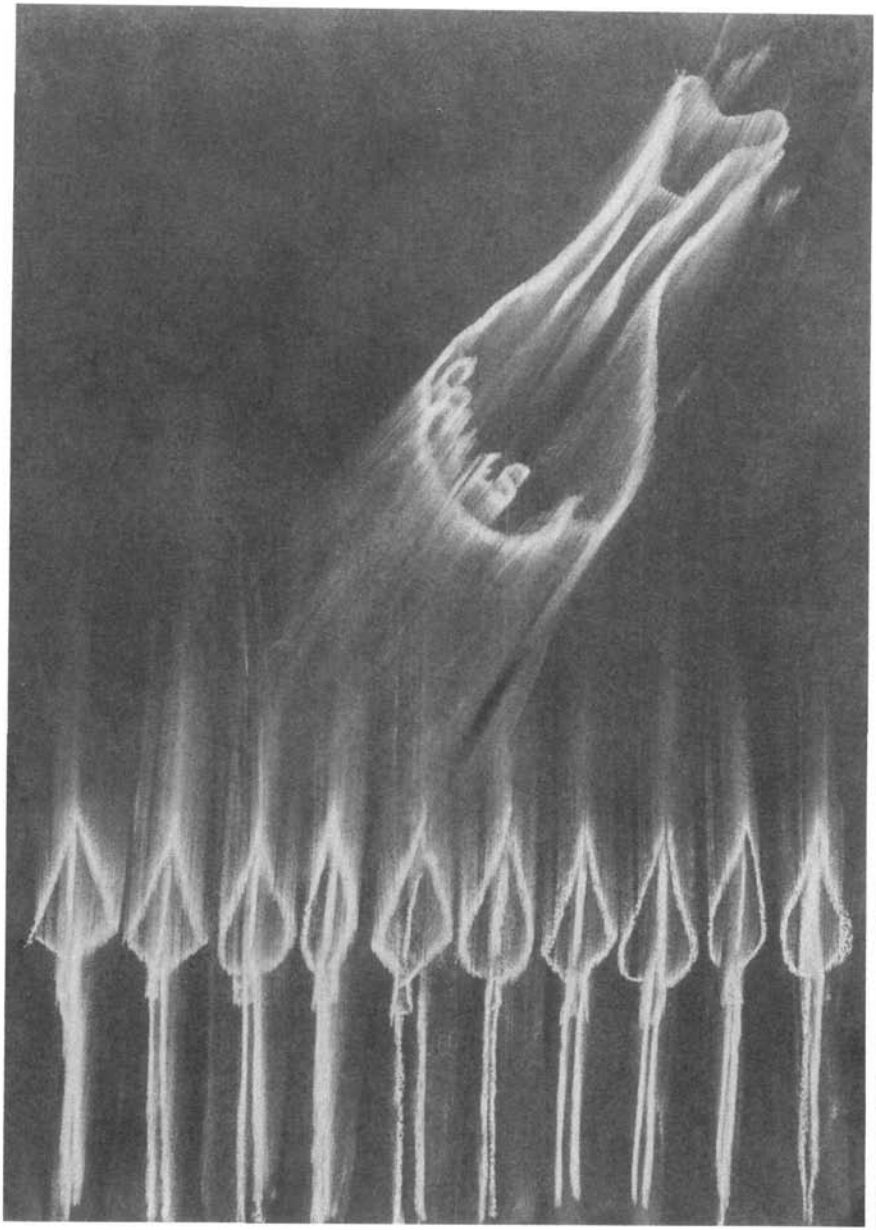

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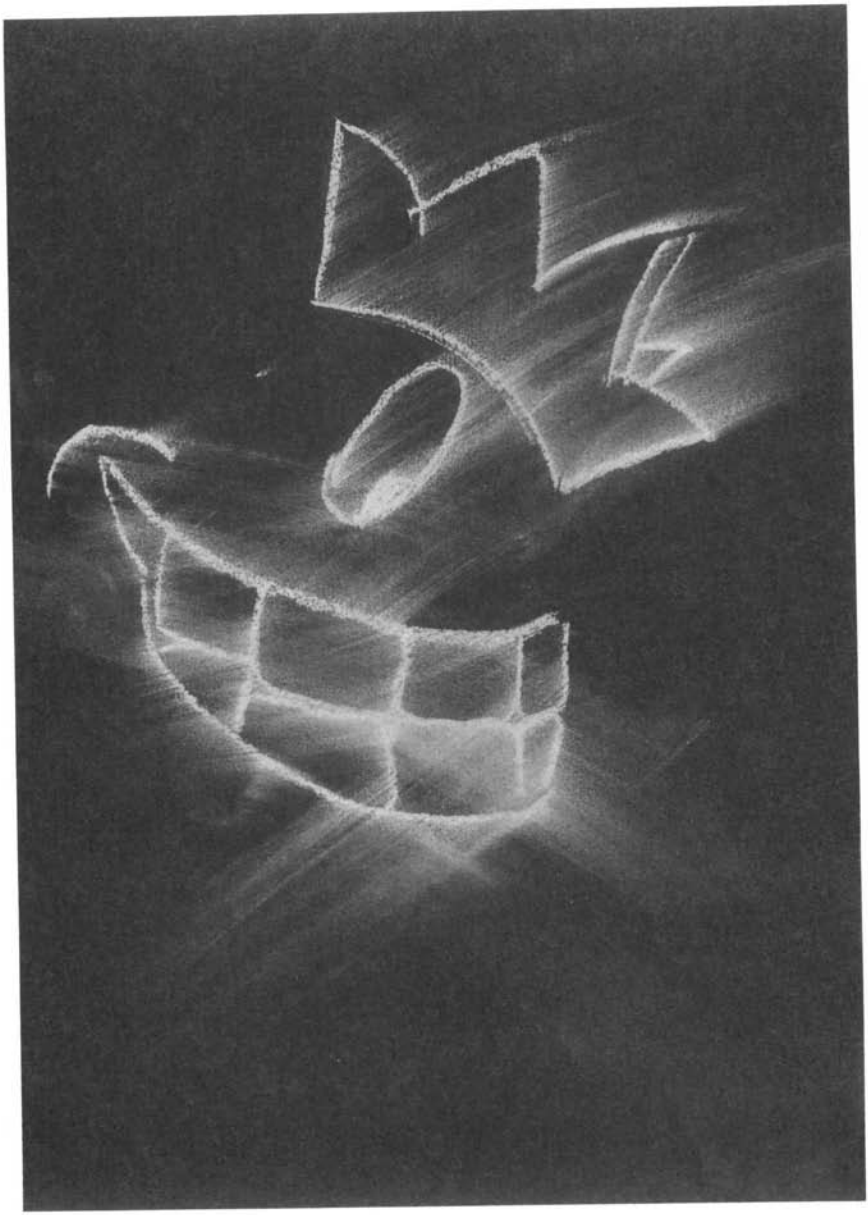

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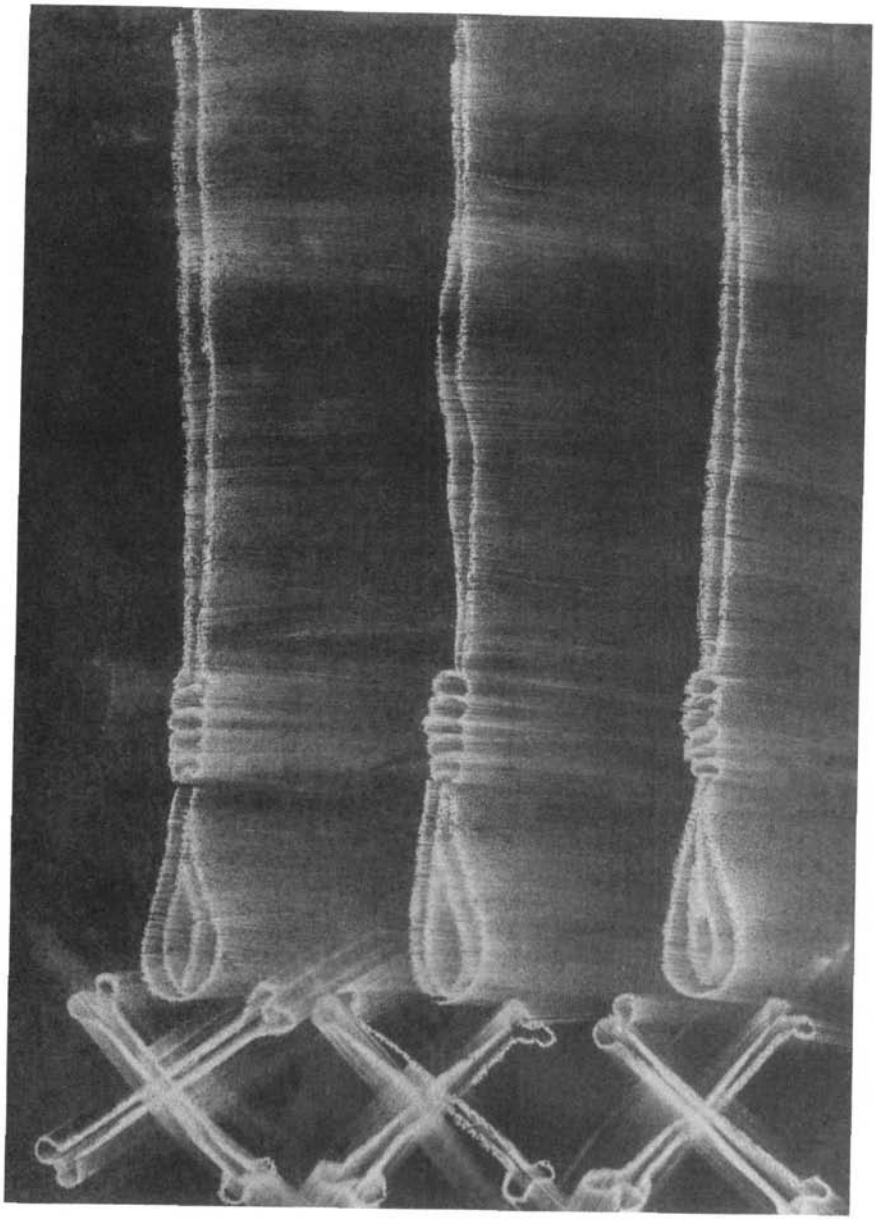

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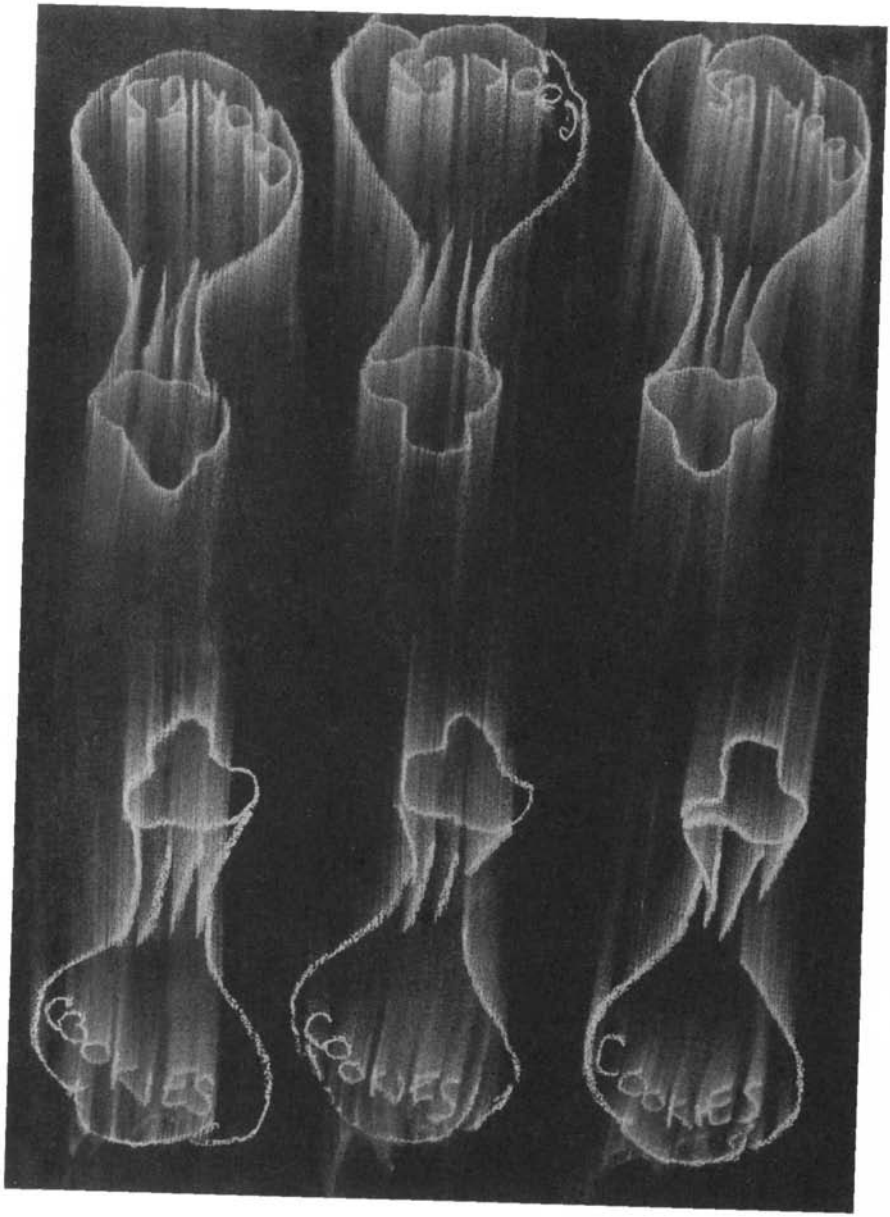

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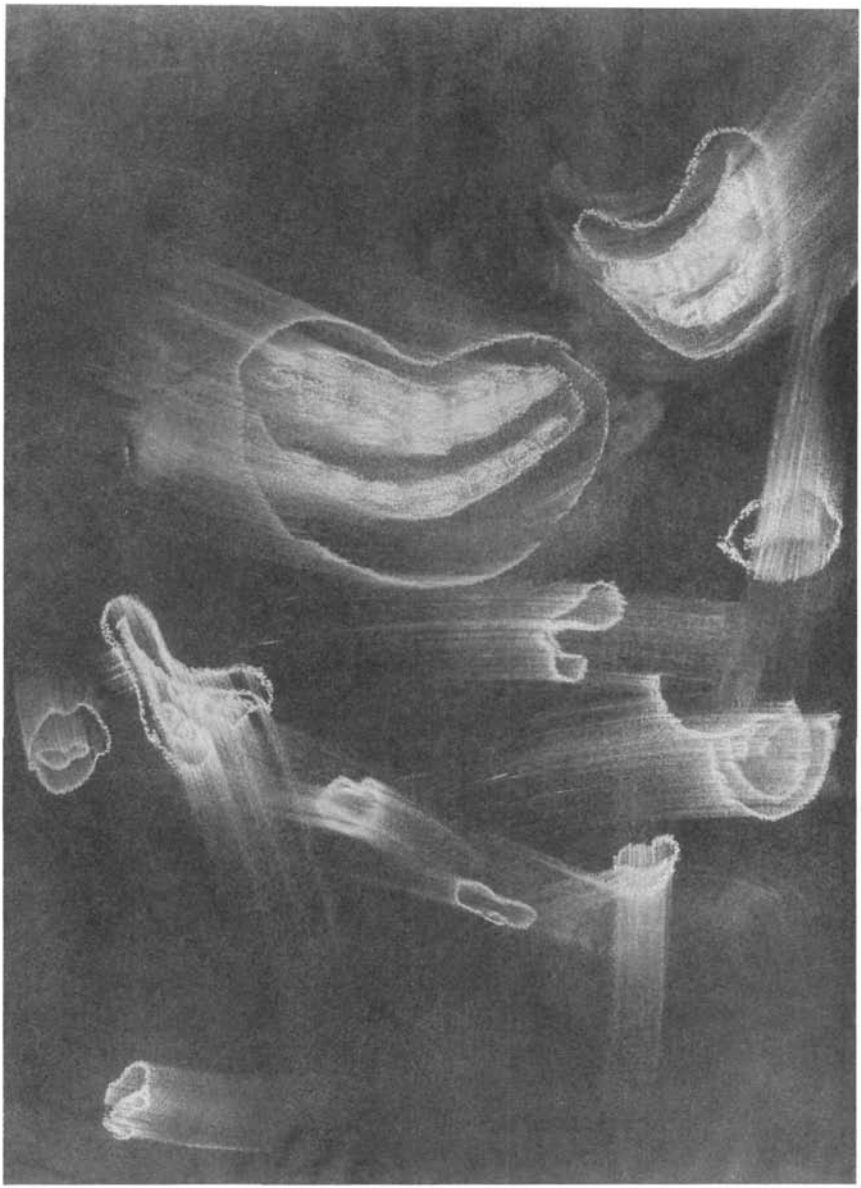

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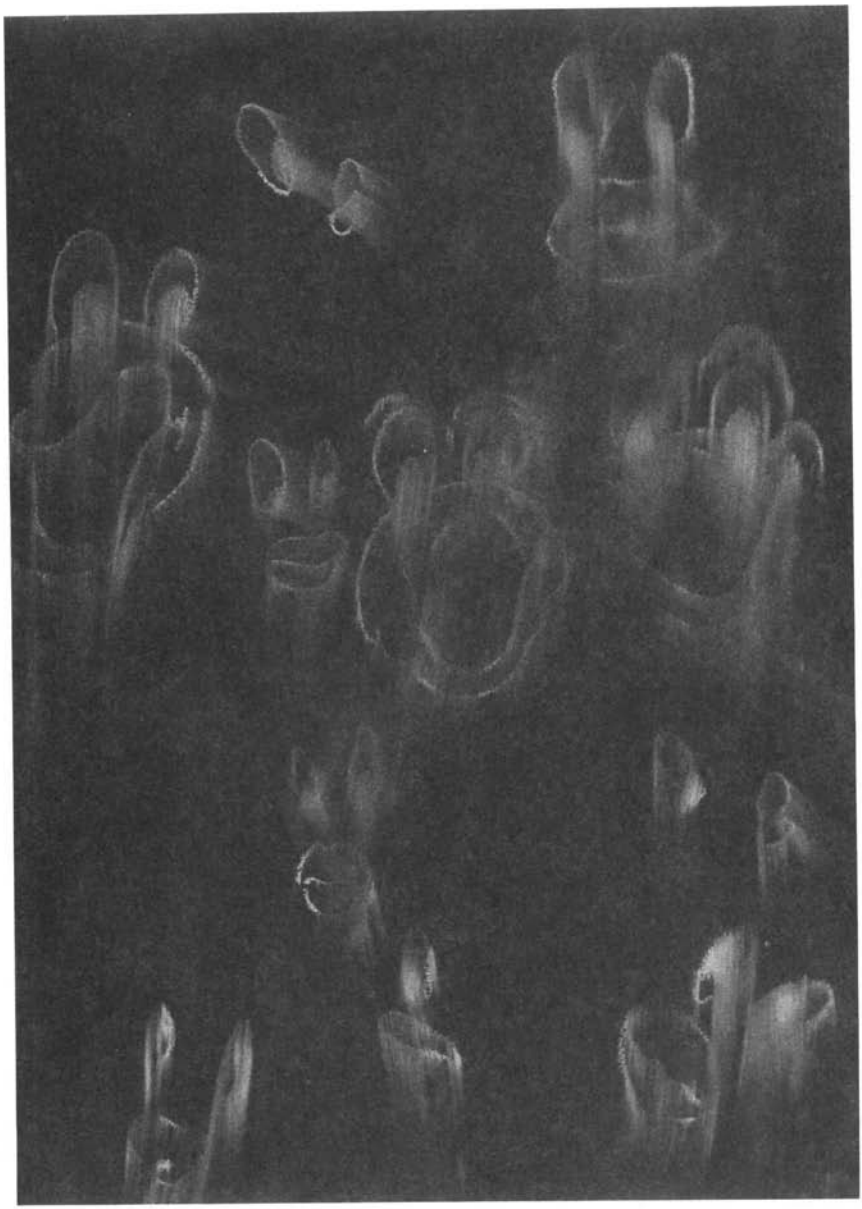

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The Good and Faithful Widow

Melissa Pritchard

We pick here because death is life's ornament, because the place is masculine without the compromising presence of a male. It is a fortress, really, and in it we play as children, infected, set subtly adrift in our Father's body.

We are a fortress vacant of femininity, apart from Lita's wavering beauty, the arcane threshold beauty of a fourteen-year-old girl.

More to the point, to give you comforting reference, we live in an historically valuable, nineteenth-century adobe compound, walled in, the vast courtyard at its center marred by skeletal tumbleweed and a crumbling Moorish fountain. The previous owner, a homosexual architect of conflicting reputation, gutted the lightless, mudded interior; it is now pristine and meticulous as a yacht, empty of female resonance down to the dominant alabaster urinals in the skylit bathrooms and the kitchen sink, aluminum and deep enough to pose in. The Realtor, a militant grandmother in dour olive, informed us our guest apartment had been a Spanish morada, meeting

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place of the Penitente brotherhood—thus the oppressive distillate of male spirits I felt there, the monastic hive's dark hum.

Lita and I have been here awhile, content I think. We know no one but each other, and our life is sweetly routine. Lita rides to school on her bicycle each morning, I walk to the town library where I volunteer. Most afternoons, we swim at the indoor community pool, which is very nearly always empty.

My child's beauty is mainly incorrupt because she has not yet acknowledged or learned to use it; when she swims alongside me in her watery corridor, like some blurred, pale iris dragged by spring currents, I would nearly compare her to the myriad angels I collect. Yet angels are ungendered, and Lita belongs to that most fertile, least accessible territory of goddesses, Innocence.

My collection, displayed, of angels suggests an ambition to ungender myself. To martyr my genitals. At a certain point in one's life, I believe the sacrifice is welcomed and therefore no sacrifice. I wish to be neutered and ambitious beyond my own residual charms. I am done, I tell Lita, if not in a chant, certainly with monotonous repetition, I am finished with husbands, lovers, fathers, brothers. At times, self-pity creeps in, meaning I am not done at all, only lonely.

Lita tests me. (I have always encouraged her to do so.)

—Then why are you Catholic, why worship a masculine trinity?

—Because death is life's ornament, and I regret your father's death by this decade's peculiar sexual plague, a plague having everything to do with the discreet and desperate sale of this house. Because my duty is to keep you safe in the cradle of naïveté until I say so, until I say so, until I say it is safe to cross the street without my hand, to swim unguarded in waters above your precious head.

—Because in ways I am responsible.

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Lita and I, who discuss everything as equals, agree to hire someone to live in the morada apartment, to maintain our things for us, help us with our everyday lives. A housekeeper.

I unbolt the courtyard gates. A primitive figure swathed in gray fleece mimics the snow, somber and marbled with mud, heaped to either side of her. She wears a hairy white cap with a flagrant pom-pom, her own hair, I surmise, plastered beneath the cap, its white rim an Italianate halo or whipping of tired flagella about her mottled face. A thin, desultory snow flecks the pewter space between us, causing me to imagine we are two odd figures trapped inside a domed, water-filled children's toy, most often a holiday scene.

I invite her into the main house, resolved to inspect character, question work habits, audition her for this ill-defined part of Housekeeper.

I am often pleasurably hypnotized by another's vulgarity. This was certainly true in the case of my husband. As this silver, porpoise-shaped creature squats in my aggressive white kitchen, squatting like a tin lump, I devolve into a sort of happy paralysis.

—Ask me my real name, she repeats.

—Irene, isn't that correct, that's what I was told at the library. . . .

—Arthur Vargas, she yelps, hoisting her sweatshirt under her chin, holding it there, her cloddish face boastful. Two speckled, cigarish breasts flop, nearly touching her girdled pear of a stomach. These are comically exaggerated, burlesque breasts, horrifyingly incorrect beside the thick wrists netted with dense, messy black hairs.

—Starting when I was ten, I wanted to be a girl. I let my hair grow long. I've had five different operations in Colorado. They kept operating until I ran out of money. I'm only half-done, half-finished.

(How evident the granite stubble, its clipped dark turf thicketing up from under the orange pancake makeup.)

When she asks, I indicate the small bathroom nearby. Irene keeps up talking, the door flung wide as she makes her noises,

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urgent and unperturbed as a cow or horse. In the month Irene/Arthur was with us, I never knew her to be anything but incomprehensibly cheerful and open-handed as wealthy people are assumed to be but seldom are. In an ironic, retrospective sense, Irene approached my ideal, childlike, joyfully neutered (in her case one set of genitals quite literally knocking the other out).

My child, home from school, stands in the doorway, a gold and ivoried marzipan, a confectionary swan.

—Oh Lita, this person is androgynous. Biologically liberated. Imagine.

—Ish, Mother, Lita sighs, cracking open the restaurant-sized refrigerator door, hunting around for one of her interminable vanilla yogurts. You are bored, aren't you?

•

I took on Irene with perverse fascination and fraudulent motive, and if it is simpleminded, too easy a target, I still insist Lita's change for the worse began soon after. People are celestial chemistries, after all, and Irene's tainted elements provoked my daughter into exhibiting symptoms. Back when she was three, Lita came down with chicken pox, one peppermint speck at a time, one, then dozens, candied her white skin, until the whole feverish body was blotched and unseemly, suffering. Since Irene has begun keeping house for us, Lita's symptoms are exactly similar, faint, singular, then cumulative and finally disastrous. Between us, silences now thump out like measured bolts of stiff yardage, conversation fails, stifled by resentment, rebellion, who knows what.

My darling. Newly, irrationally conscious of three young men in chairs beside the pool, lifeguards. Lita swaddles herself in a baby blue towel, minces in hobbled steps to the pool's edge, deftly slips out, like some delicacy from a wrapper, into the pool. Worse, she now refuses to change into her suit or come out of the dressing rooms, staying in that dank, greenish place, playing solitaire, wearing baggy, shapeless clothes until I return from my swim, resolutely cheerful. Here I am, released

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by my body's imperfections, so legion as to force me into indifference over anybody's opinion of it . . . my physical deterioration yielding the unexpected virtue of freedom from caring what three young men by a pool might think, just as my physically splendid daughter skulks, fully clothed, in a mildewed shower stall, snapping down card after card in a compulsive, ordained pattern.

I am a weak person. My nature submits to any personality perverse and dominant enough. This was certainly true in the case of my husband. And though I am working on this weakness in myself, still, I welcome Irene at my front door each day, knowing I will listen helplessly to her prurient exploits, hang on like someone ravenous . . . until she concludes her work by heating up a can of alphabet soup, that peculiar sweaty stink of tinned soup as provocative as any romantic atmosphere.

I never ask Irene what she does in her free hours. They are hers. My pity breeds an insidious, false sense of superiority though it is a relief to pity someone besides myself, slighted by a child for whom solitude and privacy have become luxurious and coveted concepts; while for me, they are incarcerations.

I step up my activities in the San Francisco de Asis parish by volunteering for jail ministry. On Thursday evenings, I drive to the town jail to assist with mass, while Lita stays home to answer an increasing number of personal telephone calls, taken in sullen monotones.

How justifiably morose and vain are the young!

Our routine is damaged. I trail Irene about, helping her move rugs, pieces of furniture, lending her extra money, asking advice about Lita, over whom I have become like some spurned, mopish suitor; as her popularity with persons named Robin, Aki, Phoenix and August increases (all curiously asexual names), her communication with me inversely dwindles to curbed, reluctant responses.

And this idea of baggy, misshapen clothes! I'll see Lita off for school in one of the expensive outfits I'd helped her choose

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before we moved here, and she'll bike home in something bizarre, a huge, faded college shirt, torn leggings . . . some squalid orphan getup from Dickens.

I snuck into her room one night, to lift up the white eyelet comforter and pinch her leg, to test how bony, how possibly anorexic . . . but her flesh was rounded, rosy, edible and instead of holding the lantern over the beast I beheld by mercury streetlight, forbidden, perfect beauty.

One afternoon when the library was closed for Presidents' Day, I searched through Lita's room . . . like an ardent detective . . . discovering notes, dozens of notes creased into elegant origami birds, clever flowers. Unfolding each one, I read obscene, sluttish trash . . . girls confiding in Lita, appealing as if she were an oracle in these matters, such an appalling, whorish rush of heat, actual or conjured, I couldn't tell.

I served them. Cooking Lita's childhood favorites, which she disdained though prettily, so as not to offend me. Giving Irene money to fix her station wagon, writing to her mother in Albuquerque (Irene neither reads nor writes). The solicitous servant whose misery is undetected, pathological.

While Irene/Arthur Vargas, ever flagrant in her happy stories of having been a madam in a small-town brothel, for all her shameless concupiscence and gluttonous triumph at having contorted her body into a double-genitaled freak of nature, was as closed to me as Lita. As if they were in some collusion or conspiracy not so much against me as necessarily excluding me. *Exclusion*, a terrifying word.

My respite is in the library, among perished authors, their spirits tamped in homely black ciphers upon the page, and still-living authors, shut willingly up in blocks, in cool, regimented neighborhoods.

The church, San Francisco de Asis, my second refuge. The robed, compassionate priest, the monogamous servers of the host (its ivoried planet upon my dog's tongue!), the celibate children, my sexless angels.

In jail, where mass is celebrated on the free side of the bars, I wring compassion from myself like a sponge, try to scrub

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down the cell with it. This jail resembles a Fisher-Price toy, like the ones Lita's father used to buy her, barns and schools and airports bought out of guilt and remorse, motives a child can't see for their ruinous subtlety.

The communal cell is windowless cinder block, painted white, the first time white impressed me as an evil color.

Standing close beside the priest, I read aloud from the missalette, "Cursed is the man who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a barren bush in the desert that enjoys no change of season, but stands in a lava waste, a salt and empty earth . . . " I read aloud to the white cement walls, the white bars with the scarlet lock, read to the white floors with fat scarlet lines and fat arrows going this way and that like a child's gameboard, read to the brown plaid couch, the plywood bookshelf with Reader's Digest Condensed Books and stale magazines, read aloud to the sludge-colored TV and to six prisoners in construction-paper orange suits, chunky Fisher-Price figures, their feet in oriental, black rubber thongs.

The priest is a young man, newly ordained and a flashy dresser. Under the apple green brocade surplice, his suede, brass-edged cowboy boots stick out. His earnest face sweats. In expensive western wear under apple green brocade, he preaches to the prisoners all of whom are Hispanic like himself, on the worthiness of poverty, the blessings of insult, the woe to come to the rich and the unhungry, who will scatter like chaff into nothingness.

•

In crisis, I hear my mother's voice, drowned in idiom:
a fine kettle of fish!
from the frying pan into the fire!
dumb as a stump!
holy catfish! pete's sake!
hell's bells!
Irene has been arrested for selling beer and wine out of her

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newly repaired station wagon on Sunday, yesterday. She has asked to see me.

We find the second key, Lita and I, and like guilty snoops, unlock the small morada door. First impression, the place is suspiciously neat. We look but don't find wine bottles, beer cans; nothing. Maybe the police confiscated everything, Lita suggests breathlessly. Neither of us has ever had anything like this happen to us.

In the bathroom, we stand before various tubes and bags, strange apparatus hanging from the shower rod, so resonant with sexual disturbance we do not know what to say. On a dressing table near the bed, we look, as if upon curious specimens, at depilatory devices and creams, a theatrical mirror with bare pink bulbs stuck around it, raw heaps of makeup, base, powder, lipsticks, rouges, eyeshadows . . . On the bed, a kimono like a crushed, red insect. On the windowsill, perfume bottles hold light like paste jewels. The erotic clumsily combats a subversive odor of male. The place is haunted, we both feel it.

Lita slips her narrow feet into a pair of red silk embroidered slippers, roomy and daddy-sized on her delicate feet. Humongous, Lita whispers, rising on her toes.

I leave Lita memorizing Shakespeare at the cold white kitchen table, waiting for someone named Robin to come over and help her. I think I smell wine on Lita's breath, but decide I am wrong.

•

On the free side of the communal cell where we say mass, the room is empty except for a heavyset man, his orange back to me, sitting on the plaid couch, watching TV. I lean against the washing machine to wait. After a while, I walk through the booking room and into the small, flourescent-lit, windowless office, hardly different from the cell, where two policemen sit at gray desks.

—Where is Irene Vargas? May I see her?

The thinner policeman laughs. Arthur? He's been in there

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since dinner, waiting for you. I went through grade school with him, poor messed-up dude's always had this thing for thinking he's a girl.

I noticed a *Penthouse* magazine on the other policeman's desk.

I go back, stand beside the white bars. Irene.

The man watching TV turns.

Inches apart, we stare at one another. She is a mountain of humiliation. They have shaved her hair to match the stubble on her bare face.

—Could you bring my makeup, my stuff. I'm losing it in here.

Except for the grainy crescent of beard above the genderless orange, Irene's moony face is a communion host, secret, opaque, monstrous.

I talk to the thinner policeman about going home to get some things for my housekeeper. I ask how much money to release her on bail.

As I am leaving, putting on my coat, he says, "No razors."

—What?

—You can't give Arthur razors. He'll kill himself.

—He's been here before?

—Arthur Vargas? I've lost count. Like I tell you, he's a piece of work. Leonard here, he's always kind of had a crush on him, right Leonard?

•

Vain, pinkish light comes from the morada, from Irene/Arthur's apartment, while across the courtyard the kitchen lights are on, but I don't see Lita. Leaving the wooden gates unbolted. I move stealthily into a thick clump of bladed iris beneath one of the windows, ornate ironwork across its glass, the effect like spying through a black veil . . .

My eyes water, my feet are numb, stolid in the raw, tarry mud, the courtyard is a ghostly square, shabby with weeds and stubborn islands of grim snow, the deteriorated fountain rising repellent in its center.

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Someone blocks my vision, stands directly in front of me, then moves further into the room as if receding. From the back, this person of indeterminate sex has a long, brown ponytail, is tall and egret-slender in the red kimono.

Lita is sitting crosslegged on the bed, very close to me. The figure in the kimono turns, arms flung, red sleeves winglike, the face ethereal, amoral. He smiles directly at me, that is impossible, he must be smiling at my daughter. This boy begins to gesture melodramatically, an arm flung this way, then that, the head tilting limply, the face malleable, at once compelling and utterly foolish. I cannot bear him.

My mother steps briskly out of me and goes to the door, knocks hard.

—I've come to get Irene's things, good heavens, what are you two doing? What game is this? Out, at once!

But I am rooted to the barred window, an ugly plant thrusting unseasonably from the dormant iris. From my post of concealed privilege, I persist in watching, find solace, watching.

When the door abruptly opens, I crouch down, unseen. They walk toward the house, playfully reciting lines, Hamlet, Ophelia, Hamlet, Ophelia. Children. Still so.

In mud-drowned shoes, I enter, kneel in the dark apartment to the broken body of Irene/Arthur, kneel to my child's innocence, my daughter's innocence, kneel for myself, gone into spiritual pride and a profound, corrupting loneliness.

After Lita and I were again by ourselves, without a housekeeper, we went to the pool. Lita kept to the dressing room while I swam, diligent, compulsive, the nearest form of happiness for me, when Lita unexpectedly walked out, unflinching as a goddess, setting her bare feet resolutely, then diving, her splendid form hung in light, before vanishing beneath water smelling unnaturally of clay.

If Schopenhauer were alive, I, the good and faithful widow, would blindfold and spin him three times, unmask him and say, "Okay about your patterns, your ideas of fate and fixed patterns in a life, what about this then, what about this, how about this?"

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Three Poems by Sandra McPherson

Ode to Early Work

Of those who finally win notice,
of these artists it is said their early work
is either purer, more astounding,
or fainter, less filled in, too
central. Or all vision, little hand.

But I like them as I like late Auden:
home's in the meter, the pen's in a landscape
or a side-yard, the colored pencil shades
a written line. He could have drawn some words
in crayon (not all). Even enjambed stanzas

could be framed—in wood. Early Minnie Evans
is plump cat-faces whose ears
are humans; or sparse seedheads
of grasses from baptismal basins in a drought.
That line which comes soonest

shows the hand how blood-and-bone pristine
it is, but also proves to the dreamer
this is not a sleep plot, the hued dirt
of a line is awake for love.
Murry's first works were on adding machine tape;

Mary T. Smith's on corrugated roofing panels to fence the yard.
Now she paints on plywood works to sell.
One's dawning empty backgrounds count.
Too delicate colors, nascently gutting the white,
still scratch against each other.

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Nor should all early work
be viewed in the morning. It is
in the grinding maturity of lateness,
the stretches of lightlessness, that early work
can bring the tact, tensility,

one lost in propounding, even pleading for, one's life.
Early work that commenced in
souls older than most lives,
first marks swirling toward too many lions,
or oafish compulsive scowling mugs,

or sweet roseate cheeks blotting up
a market of paper bags. Nevermind,
keep going, keep moving, as long as you include
point zero in your work, as long as there
is no eraser at your genesis.

Trading

Phyllis says she makes a good bear.
I don't really want to trade a quilt
for a teddy bear. Neither
do I want Phyllis feeling bad.

Phyllis wants a quilt I own
stuffed with lace curtains and underwear.
She wants it for her young son's bed. Oh,
I do not know anymore—

souls have sunk deep and found no furnishings there:
even of guilt
the purest place is absolutely bare.
Phyllis wants something she can make

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into a pillow for her boutique.
She'd rather trade than sell.
I live at the bottom of a well,
must keep everything just so

and keep it all.
Swap me something with butterflies on it.
We have to trade what gives me
pain for what gives you cheer.

Something the needle has touched
prickles for each of us.
I want to give, reach the top shelf and thrust toward
Phyllis a thing to redefine

as satisfactory
that had no worth before,
just its own empty body,
its bare-faced history,

that as it changes hands
is changing
perfectly—
ugly to beautiful.

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My Personal Hercules

I have no way to earn a living
but to find a giant horse
and make it stand in a yellow tent,
one harvest-amber town after the next,
beside the bigger and sadder bull
and the tiny, resourceless stallion,
Garboesque, lying on pale straw
in a sunken, untouchable court.

If my enticement is any more monstrous today
than yesterday, if it builds any more power
into its sides, if its red-gold plush
weaves any broader Belgian tapestry, if it
scratches its burgeoning knee with ever more giant teeth,
my living and my sadness will prosper,
dependent on death to chalk their height—
more chaff in a greater fringe of eyelashes.

Two-tone phallus, pink end proffered,
truck-tire-black tubing retrieving it.
Constant alfalfa, barrel of water quaffed
with tsunami tongue: it is happier
eyeing people to ignore
than is "Ten Thousand Hamburgers on the Hoof" next door,
happier than the paragon rabbit
nibbling its ribbon, blue.

We have no home, no hutch, no roost.
I am a brute. The horse
is mortal and majestic, magnanimous,
whose grandeur moves by trailer.
Named Hercules, nineteen hands tall,
two thousand seven hundred fifty pounds,
five years old and grown by tumor—
pituitary, once a cinnamon foal
in Florida, disproportionate poetry.

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Two Poems by Christopher Merrill

The Fence

Once upon a time is what the fence dividing up a mountain range announces, in lines at once irregular and even.

For drama it depends upon a clear beginning, middle, and end. Its effects? Cathartic, purging landowners of their terror, interlopers of their pity. *On guard!* the playwright cries. *All the world's a fence*, the groundlings say.

In the ancient quarrel between fancy and the imagination the fence takes both sides. Nor does it distinguish between form and content, poetry and prose.

These are the four directions of the fence: up, down, right, wrong, black, white, male, female. Nevertheless, at night the fence points only toward the future, time's true north.

In Tennessee someone is pouring the wilderness into a jar—that's one way to build a fence. Here's another: trace a pebble's lineage back to Creation.

Vested with moonflowers and intimations of the miraculous, the fence tilts into the hills, loosening its nails in a provocative fashion, unbuckling the armor men are saving for the final days.

See how the fence swaggers in the wind, embodying a dying sense of justice; how it casts a shadow over the rumpled sheets of mud tucked into an arroyo in the wake of a flash flood; how it reveals our weakness for design.

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For we carried the fence, like our accents and dances, into the wilds of this sprawling continent, where it survived our twangs and replaced our two-steps.

This is where we sang until our throats—our thoughts—were raw. And this is what results from myth giving way to law and history. Who will accept the fence's first, and final, offer?

The earth itself is a fence, according to the cartographers of the afterlife, in a universe awash in fences—a belief the demographers of the hereafter reject. Obscured by the rivers and rock walls the fence crosses and climbs is one stark fact: whether the world ends in fire or ice, the fence will live happily ever after.

Should, Should Not

variation on a theme by Czeslaw Milosz

I should have pocketed the key left in the front door of the Embassy and used it to discover the fate of the Lost Tribes, sneaking in late one night to read the minutes from their last meeting.

I should have worn gloves to the Inauguration Ball, where I was criticized for my attire—my hair shirt and sandals, helmet and scabbard.

I should not have kissed the famous chef on both cheeks, praising him for the delicacy with which he fricasseed the entrails of my enemies, nor should I have ordered my father to dump the punch bowl over the archbishop's head, prompting a mass conversion among movie stars and the media.

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I should have insisted that the Minister of Sport amnesty the deserters on their way to Istanbul, instead of allowing him to execute the soldiers who had boarded up the doors and windows of my favorite brothel.

I should not have copied the cuckoo's example, refusing to build my own house, tricking others into raising my offspring. Likewise, I should not have forged the names of the dead at Waterloo in order to inherit their political beliefs and taste for carnage.

I should have called for an inquest into my behavior at the polo match, where a large swastika was burned into the grass near my opponents' goal and no one claimed responsibility for the mysterious deaths of all the horses.

I should not have eavesdropped on the ex-President reciting old speeches to himself in the middle of the night, nor believed that anyone except his wife and bodyguards would heed his renewed call for aerial bombardment of active volcanoes, nor imagined that his declaration of a permanent state of emergency in the relations between men and women was false.

I should have tuned the choir of orphans condemned to sing for their meals before turning them loose in the streets, removed from their reading lists all revolutionary tracts, and offered them instructions in etiquette.

I should not have sunk the garbage scow patrolling the Atlantic seaboard, nor saved the bandages and needles that washed up along the beach, nor exiled the hemophiliacs afraid of the sun and the sight of blood.

I should have sent out a press release detailing the fortune-telling feats of the Gypsies arriving from Transylvania to monitor our elections, then boiled the drinking water drawn from the Lethe before serving it to the heads of state celebrating the impending triumph of democracy.

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I should not have tempted the missionaries along the Amazon to learn so many native languages instead of mastering their sailing skills, nor should I have let their superiors cut down every tree in the rain forest in lieu of passing on the hunting lore entrusted to them by their first hosts—the one-breasted women armed with bows and arrows.

I should have crossed my heart when we tried to patch the hole in the sky, shoveled salt over my shoulder at the sight of the fireball plummeting into the sea, made a wish before the solar wind blew out all the lights.

I should have checked the ferry schedule for the river Styx.

I should have asked Charon for permission to troll.

I should have thrown back what I caught.

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Two Poems by David Bergman

The Guide of Tiresias

I think of Oedipus,
old, led by a boy
—Thom Gunn

Never was there a time when I did not lead him,
when I did not feel his hand upon my shoulder.

Never was there a time I was not his eyes
to tell him here lies Thebes, and there stands Corinth,

here the rocks have given way, and there two snakes coil
like twisted rope looking for a neck to hang on.

Sometimes I thought he was my mother, so gently
did he hold me when I was sick, so tenderly

did he wash me at the end of a long journey
when he could barely stand, his arms stiff and shrivelled.

Sometimes I thought he might be my father, so strong
was his grip on my body to keep me from danger,

so firm his warnings, so stern his admonitions.
And then at times he was my child, and hungrily

fed on my warmth and caresses, afraid of what
others—burning with questions—might force him to say.

"What will happen to us?" he would cry at nightfall
as if he did not already know the answer.

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Benny

Ellen and I Go Back—at least as far
as her pre-op days when she was still a man
and minced each midnight through the local bar.

Now that she's a woman everything's changed:
she's faithful to her Unisex Salon, gets in
on time to make sure everything's arranged,

and when she's out, she never touches gin.
I stop by every couple of weeks to chat
and keep the top from showing where it's thin.

She's glad to oblige: so few are left and not
one who remembers Benny, a legendary
hunk in his day, those days when men were hot.

Unlike your classic beauty, Benny was hairy—
the sweaty curls mapped out his musculature,
and his torso was split by a dark and furry

line that took wing beneath his pectorals;
in the shower at the gym, his legs were streaked
like marble, his ass circled with bristling whorls—

he was Miss Five O'clock Shadow from the neck
down! It's almost a decade Benny's been gone,
but I can see him now, cruising the meatrack,

his face powdered so pale it seemed made of bone
and his "curvaceous" calves crammed into fishnet
stockings. We used to watch him stand alone,

in hot pants, cowboy boots, and a baby bonnet
tied beneath his chin with big pink bow,
twirling a parasol with a gold fringe on it

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while the cars on Eager Street drove by real slow,
then raced away from his waving white-gloved hand.
Ellen and I agree, he was lucky to go

with his looks intact, quick, an accident—
falling drunk, they say, down a flight of stairs,
or maybe several flights, from his top-floor flat.

At least it's better than how the others fare,
all the boys since Benny who've come to work
in Ellen's shop at Ellen's other chair.

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Donald Finkel

Waiting for a Heart

1

To the living, the words for death are like the dead.
When they come calling, they're difficult to make out,
ragged at the edges, unaccountable ghosts,
voices hoarse and thin with long disuse.

To the dying, the words for life evoke the same
uncanny shudder. Once the word *endure*
had fire in her eyes, strode so firmly
across the boards of morning, they groaned at her passage.

Now at night she whimpers in the corridor.
Someone calls timidly, but she won't come in.

2

Someone floats on his back as the current bears him,
some seasons bobbing on arctic calms, timeless, numb,
some seasons basking on incandescent sands,
would send a postcard, but he's out of stamps.

And what should he write? *The weather's here.*
Wish I were fine? A new language is needed,
compounded almost entirely of verbs
and prepositions, vast and languorous
as whales. A language untroubled by nouns, without
person or tense, one gender, and infinite moods.

From time to time the room reappears. The same room,

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yet always a different face, dangling just out of reach
like some gross, amorphous fruit better left untasted.

3

Having finished shaving someone's grizzled beard,
the nurse holds up a mirror. Doesn't that look younger?
Immersed in his own dissolution, he's too busy to look,
see what his children see. Between him and them
an unbridgeable chasm widens with every wheeze
of the breathing machine.

When was it otherwise? With every year,
as he changed before their eyes from a god to a man
to a walking fossil, it grew progressively wider, whereas
from his perspective it was they who withdrew
while he remained where (and whatever it was)
he had always been.

4

The breathing machine
can only breathe.

Someone, too, was once a machine
for breathing. Ingenious:
the inspiration, the expiration.

Together now, the two of them
can only breathe. The little breaths
follow one another like lemmings, tumbling
over the edge into emptiness.

Not one reaches out
with its tiny paws
to scrabble the silence.
No small talk, no
faltering song.

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5

Someone else is walking round a corner,
trundling his heart like a kilo
of rib roast home from market.

Or driving out of the city,
nestled in the bosom of his Buick,
thrumming to heavy metal.

Someone bored, inching
nearer, nearer to the edge
with someone's heart in his hands.

Someone uncomprehending,
blissful, doomed, who doesn't
need to see someone hovering,

heartlessly waiting ahead.

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Two Poems by Judith Berke

Hotel Beach / After the Hurricane

Afterwards I said the palm tree was like a snake
coiling around the delicate outdoor bannister
but Janette said like a swan courting a swan.

The cabanas were nothing but sticks, like war.
We took pictures of each other climbing the rubble
looking incongruously tan, and healthy.

Others began climbing the ruins with us.
The woman who'd kept running up and down the stairs
hoping maybe the hurricane wouldn't see her.

The couple who'd slept as if rocked
in a cradle, though their beds shook
all night like dice in a loose fist.

All of us escaping, it seemed, from something.
Janette from the thing with her mother and brother.
I just arrived from the place for the almost crazy.

As if we'd stepped out of our lives
like out of some bad pairs of shoes.
And our lives would never be able to find us.

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In Which Nothing Is As It Seems: Vizcaya

What should I have thought seeing him climb
the magnificent marble steps
that day? His blunt Scottish nose and long angular
body looking more and more foreign
as we walked from one room to another.
One century to another.

So much about the place was lies.
The marble walls that were wood.
The stone grillwork, like coral.
Supposed to be eaten away by time
(as our love was) but actually dug
out by people.

Nothing in that place was plain; everything carved
or etched or painted;
and all the time he's whispering
that he loves me—the whispers echoing
in the high-vaulted rooms—past
the baroque tapestries,

the rococo mirrors, the 18th-century Venetian
chandeliers with their tiny, 1992 lightbulbs.
We even walked arm in arm—
the way Mr. Deering must have walked
with his guests, past the paintings of strangers
he claimed were his ancestors.

And everywhere—standing in hallways, pushing
out of the walls—was Pan.
Not ugly, as he really was,
    but beautiful.
His body long and smooth. His goat legs
looking quite human.

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We walked on, through the house. Past
the courtyard with the sky hidden.
To the bedrooms, the beds
so small our long American legs
would have hung off the ends like plants
in the wrong containers.

And in the corner of a room, a painting
of Mr. Deering. His face as clean and naive
as a little New England parson.
Just another tourist there, it seemed—
as we all were. As we are, on the earth
and maybe will be, in heaven.

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Two Poems by Shawn Sturgeon

The Prince and the Poplars

The prince is waving good-bye. *Good-bye Prince*,
we shout as he ascends the steps of his coach,
Good-bye! Then he is gone with a contagion
of hooves pock-pocking the ground, and we, left
to our plaguey families and yet one
more season of disappointing crops, *wave*
good-bye. And just when we thought he would stay

with us awhile, meet the cousins, drink
punch or tea with us all day, our pinkies
extended, our faces a cultivated
euphemism. *Good-bye!* The Prince comes down
once a year, mostly—well, he simply comes by,
and we gather to him—a brilliant host
clad in our yearly best, our boots scraped clean,

our hair slicked flat as in courting—and meet
the coach from which he steps mumbling
his few words about the weather, while our tongues
form a few thick words of greeting,
So good to meet you Prince. So good . . .
And though we never get the chance to speak,
we bow our heads to him deferentially.

What nice boots the Prince has! And what reflection
we see of our faces there ennobles
us in that black gloss. To tell the truth,
we are happy when he goes, though tired
to have contributed so very much
to his *raison d'être*. Another season
ends for us brilliantly, and we are free

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again to wipe our mouths on our sleeves, or
to stay out doors for days at a time, or
to loosen the winding cloths that keep
our wives in hand. We do, in fact, prefer this
life we lead, so rich, so uncommon.
And the poplars? They have grown stouter
by far. Next year, we shall cut them down.

The Witch *Is* Dead

They burned our witch last Tuesday, so sad
to watch her go up like a puff of smoke,
the pale ash excited into air
by a broom and the sympathetic

blaze. Our nostrils burned for days afterward—
a concession to progress, perhaps—
an older spell, but practical we still hope.
Well, our witch lived here by this knotty oak—

I gather you've seen the warts? So much
the better, I suppose. But what remains
when you've burned your witches behind you? We
shall see. Still, the neighborhood *feels* safer,

though the rats may come to plague us yet.
Mostly, we kept her around for parties,
when she'd give the children rides for a song:
ancient toys, strands of hair, lint—all dull things

we would have burned ourselves in time. Later,
we would croon her to sleep, at dawn, exhausted
by her spirits. Every village had *one*.
We'd praise her now if we knew what words would do.

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Four Poems by Robert Hahn

Tell the Truth

> *To claim, at a dead party, to have spotted a grackle,*
> *When in fact you haven't of late, can do no harm.*
> *Your reputation for saying things of interest*
> *Will not be marred, if you hasten to other topics,*
> *Nor will the delicate web of human trust*
> *Be ruptured by that airy fabrication.*
>
> —**Richard Wilbur,** "Lying"

You wake and reach for the phone. No one is harmed
if you call your wife to claim you have seen the Pacific
at dawn, running for miles over the quick
blossom-and-fade of an image, on the glassy sand,
when the mist and the lightly stippled sea were a single
tone of gray. A simple invention. Meanwhile,
far below, the trackless beach and the green,
heaving ocean are beginning, only now,
to be disclosed in the wide panes of your room.
You wake alone. What have you done? Nothing,
or next to nothing, or let us say, you have altered
the sense of a thing in its telling, like Conrad's Nostromo,
the fallen hero who stole the silver he was trusted
to guard. He wakes alone, on the half-moon beach,
on the island where he hides the cargo of ingots. To account
for this loss, he begins to invent a vita nuova,
for his life is his to shape, a lump of wax,
a blank, a dead space to fill, like the ceiling
of your neutral room, which you now begin to fill,
lying in bed, first with a fervid blue
from Annibale Carracci, and then with white and gray
bursts of billowing cloud, edged in pink.
Up the vaulting space, muscular figures

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stream, with red robes aswirl, with arms
outflung. Their eyes are wide, their mouths agape,
they are all ecstatic, or alarmed, or they are racing
to bring the news of what they have seen, faithful
to fact, but greatly heightened. They are disarming
messengers, and their words have designs on us—
"I saw the figure five in gold," or "I caught
this morning morning's minion." It does you no harm
to believe them, although you long to be as simple
and passionate as the dawn, the unequivocal angel
who glides down a single gilt diagonal
to the truth, speaking without premeditation,
stirred by nothing but the factual world as given,
a colorless wind that spins the aluminum turbine
blades to a silvery blur, and shakes the wind chime's
bamboo tubes into random, artless song,
a few notes, in the quiet evening, on the porch
where we sit together and say, we have had enough
of projecting ourselves into dramatic scenes,
insisting on a rapturous witness of the world, in words
that crackle and flash, in which the snowy egret,
arriving early in the marsh, is the white dove
of heaven. But then, who knows what messengers
cloak themselves in flashy forms, to streak
across the blank screen of our days, with news
we need but have failed in our humble insistence on fact
to imagine? Say that the fall of the Angel of Light
is neither defeat nor confession, but a brilliant device
sustained in space, deceiving the eye, a banner
unfurled, of radiant particles, a billion times
told lovelier in our retelling. The world
is not betrayed if we fall in love with the colors
of distant horns, echoing in the valley of their saying—
"Go tell the Lacedaemonians, that here
Obedient to their orders we lie"—sheerest words,
faithful to the case of a world only in part
our own invention, designed to alter or heighten
all that befalls us in our long fall.

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Conversation with a Dealer, about a Painting in Private Hands

"One wearies of looking for all that's *not there*
in Monet, in the brainless shimmer, the whirl
of his vast ambition, to be absorbed in the airy
flora of the other world,"

or so my general theory goes, your answer
to which is "listen we're talking five million
bucks of painting here." Or at least we were.
The sale, yesterday's thrill,

is off. Today you're looking for "anything French
of a certain size," needed by a Japanese
client for a corporate gift. You shrug. "My business
is mainly crap . . . but these

I keep for myself," opening a drawer of prints
with a showy gesture, a cooperative hush,
as the trilling phone and the chatter of the FAX machine
pause—a lion cub

curled up for a snooze. . . . Delacroix! You roll
the vowels of the over-valued and -wrought
name, transporting us to the great hall
where heroes translate thought

into action or cash. In another drawer, an image
of the minimal world emerges, its lines
of black laconic, positing faith in the limitless
power of space: an implied

canal, a bridge, and two figures in revery,
simple men, we like to assume,
obedient to the blunt instructions of their master: be
composed. Tell the truth.

We say we revere Camille Pissaro, for the anarchist
views of your youth and his pure refusals
of other worldly glitter, contradicting
ourselves to save our souls.

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All Clear

Drums. Cannon. Punishing rain. Lightning
has roused the auto-theft alarms
on Avenue Beaumarchais to an eerie siren-
wail of grief, or something like it—

what's wrong? Step out on the balcony and see:
The sidewalk streams with verdigris
and rosso in gleaming black, the cars are chased
around the corner by brilliant alter egos

and new faces bloom: in a martial quick-step
the balcony *en face* fills with a crew-cut
and khaki T-shirt. Hmph! Nothing requires
his attention. He bangs his shutters

closed, while above a blonde in a red dress
is—opening drawers and cabinets,
almost dancing—expecting a lover, or stunned
by the never- or always-expected message,

All is lost! Cornell's boxes empty
and fill . . . doesn't he remind you, the guy
scratching his head, in the rumpled white pajamas,
of a silent comedy hero sweetly

bemused (Harry Langdon?) as chaos swirls
around him. . . . Tugging his sleeve, the girl-
friend is the ingenue, kittenish but matter-of-fact:
Back to bed! No one's hurt,

nothing has fallen to earth. The arcs of the high
bridges are firm. The horses rise
unbroken from fountain pools, their nostrils flaring
their flanks streaming with ribbons of light.

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The drums are muffled. The rain decamps. The sky
clears of its clouds, the all-clear siren
begins to lift its buoyant high C
over the dripping gardens of the city,

luxe, calm, et volupte, a breath-
taking note, like Bix Biederbeck
before his face and his talent were ruined by gin,
whose "tone sounded like a girl saying yes."

Mob Rules

Has it ever occurred to you
That the people who write
On walls are organized?
—Mary Campbell

Our text, class, is chaos. We are its authors. These words,
our illustration, are random and senseless, until the rules
to reveal their sense are revealed, or invented, like the laws
of cells,
or quarks, or "dark matter": a red graffito, MOB
RULES, sighted in darkest Brighton, Mass., where Chaos
wore the mask of a city, rational once but now anarchist-

ically sliced and diced by turnpike and "urban renewal." An
anarchist
Circle A sprayed nearby suggests the words
are protest's blunt instrument, or a dadaist text: "Chaos
is the shark who rolls and rockets bluely beneath the rules
of Western Civ.," disclosing *l'homme politique* as a mob,
and "social science" as nonsense, random as the rioting cells

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of lymphoma. Terror Reigns is the text in the study-cells
of the local commune. Or the words are an anti-anarchist
warning, sternly parental, "where there are no rules, the mob
is the only ruler," or the words advise, "the mob's word
is law down here. Obey it or die. Patriarcha rules."
If our readings reel and roil, this is the nature of chaos,

according to physics' *enfant terrible*. His theory, called CHAOS
says turbulence rules. To prove this point, his convection cell
models shadows of rolling air, unmasking rules
of nature's inherent disorder. "Disorder," the Spanish
anarchists
argue, is the heart of a natural order. When Foucault's words
enlarge their text, a sprawling theory reveals "the mob"

as "socially constructed." Meaningless words. Wasn't the mob's
face plain in the New Mexican prison riot? Chaos!
"To survive, you acted crazy and waved a knive"—no words
could help the informers trapped, decapitated in their cells
Random? In the Civil War Draft Riots, the "anarchists"
were Irish, their victims black. Class, there are *always* rules.

I unearthed these for our found-poem, MOB RULES:
"Mission of Burma" was a punk-rock band (they ruled!) and
MOB
their acronym. In their thrashing concerts, an archarchist-
ic rampart of snarls, disorder was the order of the day, and
chaos
was play. After slam-dancing and stage-diving, their cells
of unemployed zealots wandered out to spray these words

on walls. Thus our précis: "CHAOS" unfolds the rules
of anarchist nature, and structuralism the law of the mob,
while poets, plotting in their cells, deface the world with
words.

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Circe Drawings

Erwin Pfrang

The following selection of drawings was inspired by the Circe, or nighttown episode of James Joyce's Ulysses *—a dramatic account of events taking place in a Dublin brothel.*

Although the text which inspired the drawings is included here, the artist points out that he is not interested in mere illustration. "It was never my aim to make Joyce's prose readable by visual means . . . It was rather a question of what Joyce did to me, of the images that ran through my mind when I first read the novel. And then: cut and tear, the rubbing in of spittle and pain, the intellectual hair-splitting, the networking of the nonperishable parts, and mix the whole lot with what the day carried to my doorstep."

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DR. DIXON

[. . .] I appeal for clemency in the name of the most sacred word our vocal organs have ever been called upon to speak. He is about to have a baby.

[. . .]

BLOOM

O, I so want to be a mother.

MRS THORNTON

(In nursetender's gown.) Embrace me tight, dear. You'll be soon over it. Tight, dear.

(Bloom embraces her tightly and bears eight male yellow and white children. They appear on a redcarpeted staircase adorned with expensive plants. All are handsome, with valuable metallic faces, wellmade, respectably dressed and wellconducted, speaking five modern languages fluently and interested in various arts and sciences. Each has his name printed in legible letters on his shirtfront: Nasodoro, Goldfinger, Chrysostomos, Maindorée, Silversmile, Silberselber, Vifargent, Panargyros. They are immediately appointed to positions of high public trust in several different countries as managing directors of banks, traffic managers of railways, chairmen of limited liability companies, vice chairmen of hotel syndicates.)

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BLOOM

My beloved subjects, a new era is about to dawn. I, Bloom, tell you verily it is even now at hand. Yea, on the word of a Bloom, ye shall ere long enter into the golden city which is to be, the new Bloomusalem in the Nova Hibernia of the future.

(Thirtytwo workmen wearing rosettes, from all the counties of Ireland, under the guidance of Derwan the builder, construct the new Bloomusalem. It is a colossal edifice, with crystal roof, built in the shape of a huge pork kidney, con-

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taining forty thousand rooms. In the course of its extension several buildings and monuments are demolished. Government offices are temporarily transferred to railway sheds. Numerous houses are razed to the ground. The inhabitants are lodged in barrels and boxes, all marked in red with the letters: L. B. Several paupers fall from a ladder. A part of the walls of Dublin, crowded with loyal sightseers, collapses.)

THE SIGHTSEERS

(Dying.) Morituri te salutant. (They die.)

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(His Honour, sir Frederick Falkiner, recorder of Dublin, in judicial garb of grey stone rises from the bench, stone-bearded. He bears in his arms an umbrella sceptre. From his forehead arise starkly the Mosaic ramshorns.)

THE RECORDER

I will put an end to this [. . .] Remove him. *(A black skullcap descends upon his head.)*

[. . .]

(H. Rumbold, master barber, in a bloodcoloured jerkin and tanner's apron, a rope coiled over his shoulder, mounts the block. A life preserver and a nailstudded bludgeon are stuck in his belt. He rubs grimly his grappling hands, knobbed with knuckledusters.)

RUMBOLD

(To the recorder with sinister familiarity.) Hanging Harry, your Majesty, the Mersey terror. Five guineas a jugular. Neck or nothing.

[. . .]

BLOOM

(Desperately.) Wait. Stop. Gulls. Good heart. I saw. Innocence. Girl in the monkeyhouse. Zoo. Lewd chimpanzees. *(Breathlessly.)* Pelvic basin. Her artless blush unmanned me. *(Overcome with emotion.)* I left the precincts. *(He turns to a figure in the crowd, appealing.)* Hynes, may I speak to you? You know me. That three shillings you can keep. If you want a little more . . .

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HORNBLOWER

(In epbod and huntingcap, announces.) And he shall carry the sins of the people to Azazel, the spirit which is in the wilderness, and to Lilith, the nighthag. And they shall stone him and defile him, yea, all from Agendath Netaim and from Mizraim, the land of Ham.

(All the people cast soft pantomine stones at Bloom. Many bonafide travellers and ownerless dogs come near him and defile him. Mastiansky and Citron approach in gaberdines, wearing long earlocks. They wag their beards at Bloom.)

MASTIANSKY AND CITRON

Belial! Laemlein of Istria! the false Messiah! Abulafia!

[. . .]

THE FIRE BRIGADE

Pflaap!

BROTHER BUZZ

(Invests Bloom in a yellow habit with embroidery of painted flames and high pointed hat. He places a bag of gunpowder round his neck and hands him over to the civil power, saying.) Forgive him his trespasses.

(Lieutenant Myers of the Dublin Fire Brigade by general request sets fire to Bloom. Lamentations.)

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THE HOBGOBLIN

(His jaws chattering, capers to and fro, goggling his eyes, squeaking, kangaroohopping, with outstretched clutching arms, then all at once thrusts his lipless face through the fork of his thighs.) Il vient! C'est moi! L'homme qui rit! L'homme primigène! (He whirls round and round with dervish howls.) Sieurs et dames, faites vos jeux! (He crouches juggling. Tiny roulette planets fly from his hands.) Les jeux sont faits! (The planets rush together, uttering crepitant cracks.) Rien n'va plus. (The planets, buoyant balloons, sail swollen up and away. He springs off into vacuum.)

ZOE

[. . .]

(Squinting in mock shame she glances with sidelong meaning at Bloom, [. . .] *Bloom stands, smiling desirously, twirling his thumbs.* [. . .] *Lipoti Virag, basilicogrammate, chutes rapidly down through the chimneyflue and struts two steps to the left on gawky pink stilts.*

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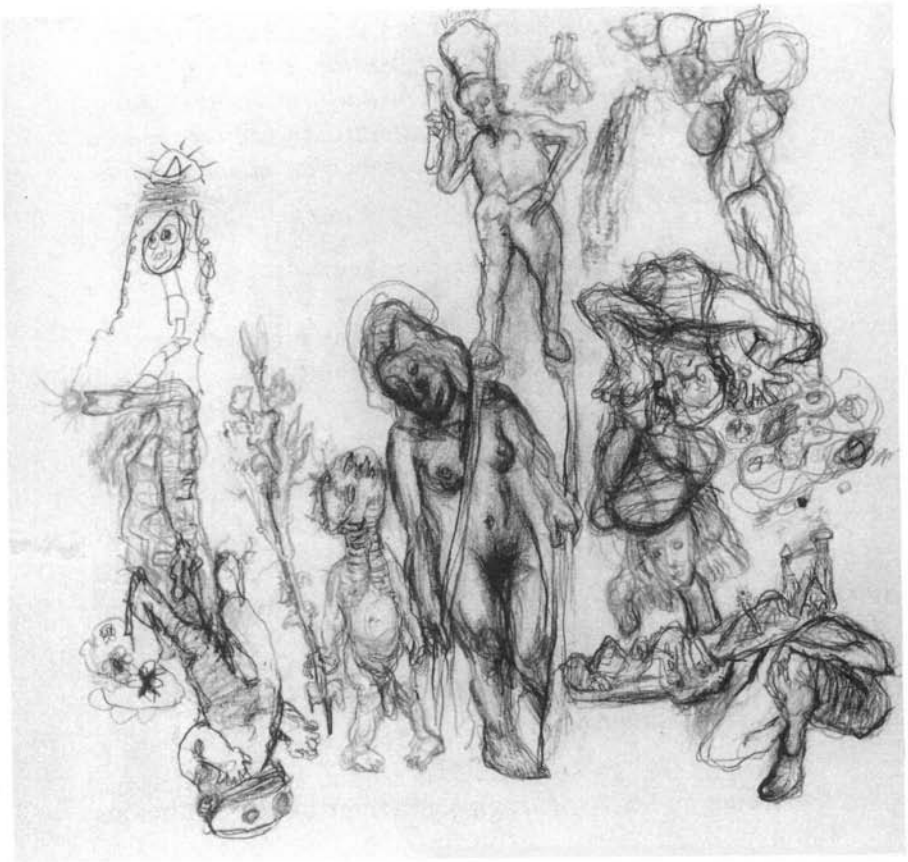

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(His Eminence, Simon Stephen Cardinal Dedalus, Primate of all Ireland, appears in the doorway, dressed in red soutane, sandals and socks. Seven dwarf simian acolytes, also in red, cardinal sins, uphold his train, peeping under it. He wears a battered silk hat sideways on his head. [. . .]

(His head aslant, he blesses curtly with fore and middle fingers, imparts the Easter kiss and doubleshuffles off comically, swaying his hat from side to side, shrinking quickly to the size of his trainbearers. The dwarf acolytes, giggling, peeping, nudging, ogling, Easterkissing, zigzag behind him. His voice is heard mellow from afar, merciful, male, melodious.)

Shall carry my heart to thee,
Shall carry my heart to thee
And the breath of the balmy night
Shall carry my heart to thee.

[. . .]

BLOOM

(Mumbles.) Awaiting your further orders, we remain, gentlemen. . .

BELLO

(With a hard basilisk stare, in a baritone voice.) Hound of dishonour!

BLOOM

(Infatuated.) Empress!

BELLO

(His heavy cheekchops sagging.) Adorer of the adulterous rump!

BLOOM

(Plaintively.) Hugeness!

BELLO

Dungdevourer!

BLOOM

(With sinews semiflexed.) Magnificence.

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BELLO

(Squats, with a grunt, on Bloom's upturned face, puffing cigarsmoke, nursing a fat leg.) I see Keating Clay is elected chairman of the Richmond Asylum and bytheby Guinness's preference shares are at sixteen three quarters. Curse me for a fool that I didn't buy that lot Craig and Gardner told me about. Just my infernal luck, curse it. And that Goddamned outsider *Throwaway* at twenty to one. *(He quenches his cigar angrily on Bloom's ear.)* Where's that Goddamned cursed ashtray?

BLOOM

(Goaded, buttocksmothered.) O! O! Monsters! Cruel one!

BELLO

Ask for that every ten minutes. Beg, pray for it as you never prayed before. *(He thrusts out a figged fist and foul cigar.)* Here, kiss that. Both. Kiss. *(He throws a leg astride and, pressing with horseman's knees, calls in a hard voice.)* Gee up! A cockhorse to Banbury cross. I'll ride him for the Eclipse stakes. *(He bends sideways and squeezes his mount's testicles roughly, shouting.)* Ho! off we pop! I'll nurse you in a proper fashion. *(He horserides cockhorse, leaping in the saddle.)* The lady goes a pace a pace and the coachman goes a trot a trot and the gentleman goes a gallop a gallop a gallop a gallop.

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Fran Lebowitz

A Humorist at Work

Fran Lebowitz's trademark is the sneer; she disapproves of virtually everything except sleep, cigarette smoking and good furniture. Her essays and topical interviews, on subjects ranging from the difficulty of finding an acceptable apartment to the art of freeloading at weekend houses, have come to be regarded as classics of literary humor and social observation.

Lebowitz was born in 1950 in Morristown, New Jersey, the daughter of furniture store proprietors. While working in the

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local Carvel ice-cream store, she attended an Episcopalian day school, until she was thrown out for "non-specific surliness." Certain that she would starve to death following this banishment, Lebowitz skipped college and moved to Manhattan, where she pursued such jobs as taxi driving, belt peddling, apartment cleaning ("with a small specialty in Venetian blinds") and selling advertising space for Changes *magazine.*

Her first published work, movie and book reviews, appeared in that magazine when she was twenty years old. At twenty-one, she began a column, "I Cover the Waterfront," for Andy Warhol's Interview *magazine, before moving to* Mademoiselle. *Lebowitz maintains that she wrote the columns with the intention of building a distinct collection of essays. In placing them in magazines she was merely pursuing her policy of selling a piece of writing as many times as possible. The essays were published in* Metropolitan Life *(1978) and* Social Studies *(1981).*

In the past ten years, Lebowitz has been a regular guest on the television show Late Night *with David Letterman. "I'm not a nervous person. I'm not afraid to be on TV. I'm only afraid when I write. When I'm at my desk I feel like most people would feel if they went on TV."*

Some years ago, Lebowitz sold a proposal for a novel entitled Exterior Signs of Wealth, *a reference to a French conspicuous consumption tax figured on the basis of display of wealth. The novel is reputedly about rich people who want to be artists, and artists who want to be rich people. When asked about the long delay in its delivery to her publisher, she explained that she only works on it on the side. "Full-time I'm watching daytime TV."*

The following interview took place one afternoon in an apartment overlooking the East River. Lebowitz discoursed without pause for two hours, chain-smoking all the while. A brief follow-up conversation took place over the phone to Lebowitz, who had decamped to Princeton, New Jersey, where she was renting the house of a noted architect and sometime furniture designer. "There are these prototypes all over the place, mixed in with my own crummy furniture. I'm speaking to you from a priceless, one-of-a-kind chair. I'm afraid I'm sitting beyond my means."

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INTERVIEWER

Young people are often a target for you.

FRAN LEBOWITZ

I wouldn't say that I dislike the young. I'm simply not a fan of naïveté. I mean, unless you have an erotic interest in them, what other interest could you have? What are they going to possibly say that's of interest? People ask me, "Aren't you interested in what they're thinking?" What could they be thinking? This is not a middle-aged curmudgeonly attitude; I didn't like people that age even when I was that age.

INTERVIEWER

Well, what age do you prefer?

LEBOWITZ

I always liked people who are older. Of course, every year it gets harder to find them. I like people older than me and children, really little children.

INTERVIEWER

Out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom?

LEBOWITZ

No, I'm just intrigued by them, because, to me, they're like talking animals. Their consciousness is so different from ours that they constitute a different species. They don't have to be particularly interesting children; just the fact that they are children is sufficient. They don't know what anything is, so they have to make it up. No matter how dull they are, they still have to figure things out for themselves. They have a fresh approach.

INTERVIEWER

If you were going to have dinner with some of those "older people" you mentioned, say writers, which ones would you pick?

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LEBOWITZ

If I had to, I would rather have dinner with James Thurber, than, say James Joyce. I'm not the biggest James Joyce fanatic and I would rather have dinner with someone who was funny. I would have liked to have met Nabokov. When I first came here, meeting writers wasn't available to me; but now that I have met tons of those people, I wish I hadn't. I never make the connection between someone's writing and who they are. In the case of most good writers the writing is better than they are. I mean, knowing James Joyce . . . was he fascinating? No. He was probably grumpy. Meeting James Joyce would be more on the order of sight-seeing, like seeing the Washington Monument or the Jefferson Memorial.

There are some great writers who are great talkers, but there are more great writers who are not great talkers. People seem to think there is some connection between talking and writing, but I love to talk, and if there were some connection between the two of them, I would be of the most prolific writer in the history of the world.

INTERVIEWER

What if you dictated a book?

LEBOWITZ

Then you would have a dictated book.

INTERVIEWER

What's the difference?

LEBOWITZ

That's not writing. Talking is not writing. To me, it would be even a slower way to write. To me, dictating a book seems impossible. But what would also be impossible, would be to write on one of those word processors. There's too much distance.

INTERVIEWER

What do you use then?

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LEBOWITZ

A Bic pen. I'm such a slow writer I have no need for anything as fast as a word processor. I don't need anything so snappy. I write so slowly that I could write in my own blood without hurting myself. I think if there were no such thing as men, there would be no word processors. Male writers like them because they have this sneaking suspicion that writing is not the most masculine profession. This is why you have so much idiotic behavior among male writers. There are more male writers who own guns than any other profession except police officers. They like machines because it makes them seem more masculine: "Well, I work on a *machine*." It's almost as good as being a mechanic.

I have a real aversion to machines. I write with a pen. Then I read it to someone who writes it onto the computer. What are those computer letters made of anyway? Light? Too insubstantial. Paper, you can feel it. A pen. There's a connection. A pen goes exactly at your speed, whereas that machine jumps. And then, that machine is waiting for you, just humming: "Uh-huh, yes?"

It reminds me of when a choreographer I know was creating a ballet. He was stuck, and he asked me to come help.

I said, "How could I help you choreograph a ballet?"

He said, "I'd like you to come and sit there while I'm doing it. You're so judgmental I would find it helpful."

So I went to his studio several times while he was making the ballet. I saw the only job that was worse than writing. My idea of pure hell. The dancers sit there waiting for him to come up with something. It would be as if the letters were sitting there, or the words, smoking cigarettes, staring at you, as if to say, "Well? Okay, come on."

Plus they are paid by the minute. And a piano player is sitting there as well. Twenty-five people sitting in the room staring at you while you are thinking. I can't believe anyone has ever made a ballet.

INTERVIEWER

Were you expected to criticize what was going on?

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LEBOWITZ

I was expected to sneer. I did sit there several afternoons in a row, kind of sneering. I don't know why he needed me, because the dancers were doing that. They were finding it hard to mask their contempt, which was: Why is it taking so long for him to think this up? Now, whenever I sit at the desk, I imagine the words sitting there sulking against the wall, waiting for me to think something up. He gave me such admiration for choreographers you can't imagine. It's just like the way I write a sentence. I write a sentence a thousand times, changing it all the time to look at it in different ways. He has to do that with living people. Human contact at its absolute worst. When people say certain choreographers are mean to their dancers, I think, "Not mean enough!" If I were a choreographer the thing I would most need would be a gun. Every time someone gave you one of those looks, you could just shoot them.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't it the same situation with a David Lean or a Steven Spielberg?

LEBOWITZ

No, because they are movie directors. To me there are only four kinds of artists: choreographers, writers, composers and painters. What they do is make whole inventions. A movie director is part of a corporation. All things associated with movie-making are so collaborative. There are so many things that directors depend on. I wouldn't have initially included a choreographer. I didn't realize how they did it. It's the worst thing I've ever seen. I had always thought that writing was the worst. But choreography is definitely worse. Plus there's noise, there's music, they have to tell the dancers to start and stop, and there have to be a certain amount of breaks to let them rest. You can't keep them dancing forever. You might have a good idea and not be able to try it because they're tired. It's horrible, horrible.

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I suggested to him that he get a computer. This is the only time I've ever suggested someone get a computer. I said, "Why don't you get a computer that has little people on it? You can make them move around and never have to give them a break."

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of when you write?

LEBOWITZ

Spelling. I am probably the worst speller in the world, so I am constantly looking things up. Every time I sit at my desk, I look at my dictionary, a Webster's Second Unabridged with nine million words in it, and think: All the words I need are in there; they're just in the wrong order.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about editing?

LEBOWITZ

I've never once been edited. I've never let anyone edit me, even when I was a kid. When I started publishing, I was writing for this small magazine, deservedly small, called *Changes*, which was what was then called an underground magazine. I wouldn't let that editor edit me; it didn't matter because they paid me ten dollars, and no one read it. Then a few real magazines began calling me and asked, "Would you be interested in writing for us?"

I'd say, "Well, yes, but you can't edit me."

Click.

Then I started writing for *Interview*, where I made a deal (no editing), which also didn't matter since no one read that magazine either. More people would call me, from real magazines now, like *Esquire* and *New York* magazine . . . and I said no editing.

Click.

My first book was not edited. Henry Robbins was my editor

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and before that Laurie Colwin. Neither one of them edited me. Joe Fox, who is now my editor at Random House, never edited me. So I've never had the experience of being edited and never will.

INTERVIEWER

Why is that? Don't you find that an editor's suggestion might be worthwhile to listen to?

LEBOWITZ

No, I don't.

INTERVIEWER

You are very positive about this, aren't you? You and Nabokov.

LEBOWITZ

When I gave Joe Fox *Social Studies*, my second and last book, perhaps the last book in every sense, he said to me, "I don't suppose you want to know what I think about it, do you?"

I said, "No, I don't."

I suppose some writers actually like to write with editors. They feel that an editor isn't an enemy but actually a helper. There is nothing more mine than my writing, nothing I'm more proprietary about. If someone were to say to me that something was wrong, some fact not true, I suppose I would be able to deal with that. But never in a matter of style. In the novel I'm writing now, there is something that Joe doesn't like, quite a big thing. He said, "I'm just telling you what I think." I said, "Fine. I don't agree with you."

INTERVIEWER

Even before he had said it?

LEBOWITZ

No, I let him say it. I may be tough, but I am polite. He disagrees with the way I have the narrator narrating the book.

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What he would have me do would be an easy thing to change. But it's just out of the question; it's not something I would seriously entertain. Joe is really an old-fashioned editor, one of the few left who really likes to edit. He's an editor, not an acquirer. You might think that we're an odd combination, since actually he doesn't have any work to do with me. My relationship with him is personal. We don't even have the same sensibility. I just like him, as simple as that.

When I went to Random House after Henry Robbins died, I didn't really care who my editor was, because if you're not going to be edited, it doesn't make any difference who your editor is. I just chose Joe because I liked him. Some authors want to know who else is on an editor's list. I didn't even care what other writers he had edited.

INTERVIEWER

How did you know you wanted to be a writer?

LEBOWITZ

When I was very little, say five or six, I became aware of the fact that people wrote books. Before that, I thought that God wrote books. I thought a book was a manifestation of nature, like a tree. When my mother explained it, I kept after her: "What are you saying? What do you mean?" I couldn't believe it. It was astonishing. It was like—here's the man who makes all the trees. Then I wanted to be a writer, because, I suppose, it seemed the closest thing to being God.

I never wanted to be anything else. Well, if there had been a job of being a reader, I would have taken that, because I love to read and I don't love to write. That would be blissful. Sometimes you meet people who really enjoy their work. Those are the people I am most envious of, no matter what their work is.

INTERVIEWER

You never enjoyed writing?

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LEBOWITZ

I used to love to write. As a child I used to write all the time. I loved to write up until the second I got my first professional writing job. It turns out it's not that I hate to write. I hate, simply, to work. I just hate to work, period. I am profoundly slothful. Practically inert. I have no energy. I never have. I just have no desire to be productive. Now that I realize I don't hate to write, that I just hate to work, it makes writing easier.

INTERVIEWER

When did you realize this?

LEBOWITZ

Recently. In the past six months I've had an easier time writing. I broke this ten-year writer's block.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you call it a ten-year writer's block?

LEBOWITZ

Because I didn't write. I had an idea for this book, but I wrote very little. When I was about twenty and had just started publishing, I thought: I'll write two books of these funny essays and then I'll write a novel. I never wanted to write a novel first. I had—because of my aversion to young people, even when I was a young person—an aversion toward writing a young person's novel. There are few books written by people in their twenties that, even if they are great books, are not in some way young people's books. It's that base longing of youth that really irritates me. I like a person who is more embittered. That embittered sensibility is not possible in a young person. You can be nasty when you are young, but you really have to be older to achieve bitterness. When I finished *Social Studies*, I had an idea for the novel, but I thought I needed a form for the book. When I was writing all those little essays, most of the topics I wrote about, everyone had

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written about. Everyone has written about everything; you're not going to come up with some new topic to write about. So I always tried to come up with some kind of form for the piece that would be intrinsic to what I was saying. I like restrictions when I write. I don't understand people who want more freedom. The terrifying thing about writing is freedom, when people say, "But you can do anything." I don't want to be able to do anything, that's too terrifying.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give an example of a new form?

LEBOWITZ

I once wrote a piece on Los Angeles. I knew I was the eight billionth person to write about Los Angeles. So I tried to think of a different way to do it. I decided to write it as if it were an entry in a children's encyclopedia. I needed something like that for my novel, though not quite that confining. For one month I went everywhere—to map stores, bookstores, looked through catalogs. Then I went to every kind of weird library—to specialty libraries and businesses that had their own libraries.

INTERVIEWER

What were you looking for?

LEBOWITZ

I didn't know. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been so catholic in my wanderings.

INTERVIEWER

But why maps?

LEBOWITZ

Maps.

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INTERVIEWER

You thought that the key to unlock your problem was in a map?

LEBOWITZ

There's this Rand McNally store that has every kind of map and map book. I spent an entire workday there. I went out to lunch and came back. I thought maybe a key to a map might be of use to organize the chapters. Of course that didn't work out. After a month I couldn't find anything. But I decided that was all right, that I had absorbed all this information, and what I needed would just come to me, pop into my mind. And it did.

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell us what it is?

LEBOWITZ

No.

INTERVIEWER

Will we be able to figure it out when we read the book?

LEBOWITZ

Yes, although it would not be significant to most people reading the book. It was more important to me. It provides a kind of bass note to the book. Discovering it was imperative to me, because I couldn't start writing the book without it.

INTERVIEWER

Was this a framework?

LEBOWITZ

It's a kind of form.

INTERVIEWER

So it could have been a calendar, a map, anything?

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LEBOWITZ

When I finally found it, it was perfect, not only what form the book would take, but also what the book would be about. You'll be able to recognize it. The book takes place over twenty years, and the story isn't the book's strong suit. So after five years, I have the key to the form. But then I didn't know how to start it, didn't know who would be telling it. Then the only lucky thing that has ever happened to me in my entire life happened. I woke up at five o'clock in the morning with the whole first paragraph in my head. Now, this just shows what a slothful person I am: I tried to go back to sleep. I thought to myself, I'm too tired. I am a terrible insomniac, and I haven't actually slept since 1962. It seemed more important to me at that moment, since I was already sleeping, to stay asleep. For about twenty minutes I tried to go back to sleep. When I realized I couldn't, I got up and wrote it down.

INTERVIEWER

Will you read us this first paragraph?

LEBOWITZ

No.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do during those five years before you started writing the book?

LEBOWITZ

I sulked. Sulking is a big effort. So is not writing. I only realized that when I did start writing. When I started getting real work done, I realized how much easier it is to write than not to write. Not writing is probably the most exhausting profession I've ever encountered. It takes it out of you. It's very psychically wearing not to write—I mean if you're supposed to be writing.

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INTERVIEWER

Is that because the ideas come steaming along and you feel like you should put them down and you don't?

LEBOWITZ

Not writing is more of a psychological problem than a writing problem. All the time I'm not writing I feel like a criminal. Actually, I suppose that's probably an outmoded phrase, because I don't think criminals feel like criminals anymore. I feel like criminals used to feel when they felt guilty about being criminals, when they regretted their crimes. It's horrible to feel felonious every second of the day. Especially when it goes on for years. It's much more relaxing actually to work. Although I might not strike you as languid, I'm much more relaxed than when I wasn't writing. I'm much cheerier, I'm definitely much happier.

Still, I don't get nearly the amount of work done that I read other people do. This is what most interests me in those interviews you do. If I could meet Shakespeare, I would ask, "What time do you get up? Do you write at night?" That is the reason I think these interviews are so great; but they're only interesting to writers. If you're not a writer why would you care? I'm not interested in the thoughts or ideas of these people, I only want to know how many pages a day they wrote. I don't know many writers. I don't have many friends who are writers. But as soon as I meet any, as soon as I can figure out that it's not too intimate a question to ask them, which is about six seconds after I meet them, I say, "How many words do you write a day?"

INTERVIEWER

Why do you want to know that?

LEBOWITZ

So I can compare myself to them.

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INTERVIEWER

Hemingway used to write down the number every day and post it on a piece of cardboard on top of his bureau.

LEBOWITZ

I count my words too. I was once at Sotheby's looking at some furniture. Just looking. This guy whom I knew came over and asked if I'd like to look at a Twain manuscript that was going to be for sale. I constantly have to disabuse people of the notion that I can afford things like Twain manuscripts. I said I'd love to look at it, but I can't afford it. He said, "Oh, no, no, no that's okay."

They think you're lying. It's amazing. You usually think of people bragging about being richer than they are. But people always assume that I'm lying when I say I can't afford something. I have to explain this to the Good Humor man, let alone the Sotheby's man with a Twain manuscript. He showed it to me. A short story. He was telling me about the manuscript and where they found it and everything.

He said, "I'm pretty knowledgeable about Twain but there's one thing we don't understand. We've called in a Twain scholar."

I said, "What is that?"

He said, "See these little numbers? There are these little numbers every so often. We just don't know what those are."

I said, "I do. I happen not to be a Twain scholar but I happen to be a scholar of little numbers written all over the place. He was counting the words."

The Sotheby's man said, "What are you talking about? That's ridiculous!"

I said, "I bet you anything. Count. I don't want to touch it, smudge up this manuscript." You know, like the sign says, you break it, it's yours.

He counted the words and saw I was right. He said, "Twain must've been paid by the word."

I said, "It may have nothing to do with being paid by the word." Twain might have told himself he had to write this

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many words each day, and he would wonder, am I there yet? Like a little kid in the back of a car: are we there yet?

INTERVIEWER

A lot of writers have to work in a special place.

LEBOWITZ

I always think when I read interviews with writers that I'll find the key to happiness. Only write at this hour. Only wear a green sweater. I'm looking for what people look for when they are buying a lottery ticket. The secret of success. The secret of success to how to get a certain amount of work done. I'm very interested in that. If you ask me whom I'd like to have dinner with, the answer is anyone who got a lot of work done.

When I finished the first three or four paragraphs of my novel, I thought to myself: Ah! This should be easy. The whole thing should be done in three or four weeks.

But here's how I got myself to write my first chapter: I was asked to do a reading at this place downtown, Three Lives Bookstore. They had been asking me for about nine or ten years, how the book was coming along and if I would give a reading. When I had those three paragraphs, I called them and said I would be able to do a reading. We made a date to read the first chapter, not written . . . yet.

Having that deadline, because it wasn't like any other deadline that you could easily break, helped a lot. A magazine will go ahead to press without you. A book, they'll wait around for you. Either way you have it pretty good, since you don't really have to meet your deadline. But people sitting in a bookstore . . . with no one up there reading, all those people sitting around, sulking like dancers.

This is how I decided on the length of the first chapter of this carefully structured book I was planning. I have a big bulletin board in my writing room that has every chapter carefully laid out on it. Now I had to write something and I said how long do I have to read? They told me. I read something,

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timing it with a clock, not my novel of course, just read to figure out how many pages I would need to write to fill that amount of time. Something like four thousand words. That is exactly how many words my first chapter is.

About this time I did a benefit reading with some other writers including Scott Spencer, whom I know slightly. Right before I went on, I asked him, "By the way, how long does it take you to write four thousand words." He said, "I could write that in a day." That was the worst thing that anyone had ever said to me. If I was on amphetamines I couldn't write that much in a day. I was crushed. I felt horrible. I could barely read what I had and then I had to listen to the other writers read. When you sit up on a stage you have to pretend to look interested. It was horrible. As I was walking out he said, "Why did you ask me that?" I told him about my impending reading and how I had needed to fill a certain amount of time. I said, "But you, you can write thirty-five hundred words a day." He said, "Yes, but then I throw out three thousand two hundred and fifty." That cheered me up quite a bit.

INTERVIEWER

What does your writing room look like?

LEBOWITZ

It's a library, the biggest room in my apartment, really quite a nice room. Not quite my dream writing room, because my dream writing room would be the Imperial Library in Vienna. It has built-in bookcases on one wall and bookcases all around. I don't think that I could write in a room that had no books in it, because writing in a room that has a lot of books in it gives me heart to know that people wrote all those books. Plus, it's companionship—it's the best kind, not just in writing, but in life. Finally, I need a lot of books to think. I own about four encyclopedias. Being uneducated in the formal sense, I'm not always sure my facts are right, or rather I'm not sure that the fact would show the idea to be right. So I have to look at an encyclopedia and read about some subject. I never

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know which books I'm going to need. I spent the summer in Princeton—not *at* Princeton, in Princeton—because it was very noisy at my place. I couldn't think of what books to take out, so I took about sixty boxes of books with me. When I was packing a friend said, "Which ones will you need?"

I said, "How do I know? I do know that at five o'clock in the morning I'll need to know something and I'll be stuck in Princeton"—which I imagined to be something like Siberia—"where there are no books."

She said, "What are you talking about? There are plenty of books in Princeton." But I had a terrible time getting books there. I always want weird books. I own one of the most seriously bizarre libraries, because I not only like weird books but find them to be useful. I always write at night, so I can't call anyone. Then, of course, when I have a question I can't write the next word until I know. If I'm at home, where I have my books, I'm reassured. I happen to own, for instance, a book called *The History of Dinner*. I might look this thing up in *The History of Dinner*. So in my writing room I have a lot of books, and I have my drum set.

INTERVIEWER

Drum set?

LEBOWITZ

You know, a drum kit.

INTERVIEWER

You play the drums from time to time?

LEBOWITZ

I wish I wrote as much as I played the drums. Fortunately, my building is built in such a way that you can play the drums at four o'clock in the morning. Unfortunately, I don't find this helps me write, nor for that matter has it helped me become a good drummer because I am not. But it does release a little anger that might . . .

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INTERVIEWER

A whole set?

LEBOWITZ

A big drum set, yes. A Christmas present from a very eminent rock musician. My secret desire in life is to be a drummer. I play alone, along to tapes. I've played with people, but I am not by any stretch of the imagination even a mediocre player. When he gave me the drums he said, "If you really learn how to play the drums, I'll make a video with you." Then he said, "I'm going to send you a drum teacher." The drum teacher he sent was Steve Jordan, a great drummer. Of course, I am just as irresponsible a drummer as I am a writer, so that meant that Steve Jordan and I never got together.

So I have my drums, I have my books, desk, table, and I have all these boards. For the novel, I got this big metal bulletin board that you can put magnets on. I divided it up by each chapter in the book. I had to take the board to Princeton. It weighs nine tons. It can fit in no vehicle that anyone you know owns. So I have this one bulletin board that has all the chapters on it, then I have three other working bulletin boards. Because of all those years thinking about this book and not writing it, I wrote down little things on matchbooks and dry cleaner's tickets. Each time I start a chapter or a section of a chapter, I go through every single one of these, and then I make a bulletin board of the structure and of the ideas that are in the chapter.

Even though I find those things helpful and this giant board helpful, in a way I know they're fakes. In other words, they're like wearing a green sweater or sharpening pencils, a way to make yourself think that you are doing work. Or like research, when you don't really need to do the research. It's a way of not writing. But it looks like writing. If someone were to come in, if the writing police should break down your door, you could say, "Hey, look, I'm doing another bulletin board."

INTERVIEWER

Did you come to any conclusions, when you were working on your essays, about the art of being funny?

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LEBOWITZ

I learned tricks, but being funny is like being tall. That is surely a thing that can't be taught or learned. Either you're funny or you're not funny. You either see things in a funny way or you don't. It's a reflex action with me or anyone I've ever known who's funny—whether funny conversationalists, stand-up comics, or funny writers. It's a reflex, the way things strike you. Being funny in writing, especially in the essay form, which is so distilled, I learned certain tricks. I don't think they would be of real value to anyone else.

Several years ago, someone asked me to talk to a class at Yale—a humor-writing class. To me this was the joke. Really, why not have a class on how to have blue eyes? If I was a parent and I found out that my child, on whom I was spending eight billion dollars a year sending to Yale, was taking a humor-writing class, I would be furious. I can't imagine a more fraudulent activity than teaching a humor-writing class. Certainly those people should be in jail. I would like to arrest them personally.

People always try to find out what the trick is to writing. When I say trick, I don't necessarily mean that in a disparaging way. Those things are something you feel when you're reading. I can always see those tricks in writing. I have X-ray vision for them, though you shouldn't be able to see them. In my work, I go out of my way to cover them up.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of the younger fiction writers?

LEBOWITZ

All of a sudden there were lots of writers younger than me. Of course, this might happen to anyone. When you reach a certain age, suddenly there are lots of people younger than you, which is really startling. If you're used to being young, you don't notice when you're not young anymore, and then all of a sudden you're compelled to notice. When I published my first book I was twenty-seven. I met other writers, but I

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thought they were all old. Then one day there were a lot of writers, and they were ten years younger than me. These kids were different. When I was a kid, the people of my generation didn't want to be writers, they wanted to be rock stars. Rock and roll was not just entertainment, it was the center of people's lives. When I was young, it was exciting and interesting. These days very young kids are maybe interested in rock music as the center of their lives, or musicians are, but the average above-average person isn't. For someone who loves books and reading as much as I do, this is a funny thing to complain about, but, in a way, I think the reason many of them became writers was out of a kind of conservativism, a fear, a kind of cynical dullness. I don't mean that there aren't interesting people in it, but that generation of people who were in their twenties in the eighties, who are now about thirty . . . it's a quiet generation. There's a kind of carefulness that you don't associate with youth. It's worse than the fifties; it's the fifties without the naïveté. It's very disheartening to encounter a fearful twenty-one year old. They haven't earned the right to be that afraid. It's not like we're living in war-torn Bosnia or something. They have a kind of middle-aged quality without the wisdom or experience. There's nothing youthful about most of those writers. There's an approach to it that strikes me as having to do with a job. To me, they're investment bankers with word processors. You wonder how their writing will change as they grow older.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think the best education for a writer might be?

LEBOWITZ

Actual education and reading. Reading is the best education. What I lack in my own life is any orderliness to my education. If you educate yourself, especially if your education is entirely through reading fiction, there are gaps the size of the Grand Canyon. But I don't like to read nonfiction. To

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me, fact is something I can look up. I probably have the weirdest self-education in history. I simply don't know when things happened. I would have benefitted from going to school and figuring out what order things happened in—who was invading whom when a certain picture was painted.

It would also have been helpful to have gone to a Catholic grammar school. The only people who know grammar are those people who went to Catholic grammar school. Those nuns beat it into them. Actually, everybody should go to Catholic grammar school, whether they're Catholic or not. Nobody, however, should go to Catholic high school. In the Catholic grammar school they should learn grammar, the way that they used to teach—diagramming sentences and stuff like that. We had that in public school, but you didn't have to pay attention because no one was going to hit you. The hitting, I think, is part of it. How else could you force people to learn such dull stuff, especially at an age when they couldn't possibly imagine a use for it?

INTERVIEWER

Should they go around the world, learn different cultures, get into wars?

LEBOWITZ

That's a very boyish idea. To tell you the truth, people's experience doesn't matter very much. Experience with a capital *E* is most useful to the mediocre writer. Vivid material is unnecessary for someone who is really talented.

INTERVIEWER

But aren't you talking about a specific type of writing, namely at the highest level? Would you discourage a writer who is reasonably competent?

LEBOWITZ

Writing is so hard. Why would you be a writer if you weren't really good at it? If you could be anything else, why would you be a writer?

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Lots of times I feel this way, and not just about writers. You look at someone trying so hard at something at which they have no ability. The one thing about people that I truly don't understand is the compulsion to do something that you are really bad at, other than doing it as a hobby.

For instance, I can't carry a tune. What if I decided to be an opera singer? I could take singing lessons from the greatest opera singer in the world. I could hear every opera. I could learn seventeen languages. I still would be a bad singer. That is something you're born with. I couldn't make myself into a good opera singer. I couldn't even make myself into a bad opera singer.

INTERVIEWER

How about the characters in the book? Have you discovered that they have taken on their own identities?

LEBOWITZ

A pleasure in writing a novel is that you can make your characters do anything. I have not had the experience which I've been dying to have my entire life, where the characters take over and become themselves. This is something I've always read about. "You don't know what your characters are going to do next. They just start talking to each other." That's a cute notion, like saying, "I walked into my office and there was a book that was written by itself while I was sleeping." If I live to be a thousand it will never happen to me. People are always saying that happens, but it's a lie. My characters have no personality of their own. They have no life of their own. They don't talk to each other on their own. They have to be pushed every inch of the way—by me. I have more of a chance winning the lottery than of having my characters begin to talk to each other on their own.

INTERVIEWER

Why do novelists have such trouble with sex?

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LEBOWITZ

Well, in my book they're not having any sex, so that's how much trouble I have with it. There's sex in the sense that characters have lovers and there are a lot of references to sex. There are no actual sex scenes. Writers have problems writing sex scenes, because writing one really well is pornography.

I wrote pornography when I was young to make money, to make very little money. I don't know why they have so much trouble trying to define what pornography is. It's very easy. Pornography is writing the intent of which is to get someone turned on. So if you write a sex scene and you write it well, that is pornography. Now I don't object to pornography being in a novel, but I don't want my readers' attention distracted. I can't think of one example of an explicit sex scene that I found the least bit interesting. Writing pornography is deadly, nothing duller. I mean a toll-taker has a more exciting life than a pornographer.

INTERVIEWER

So you weren't turned on by what you were writing?

LEBOWITZ

No. These books were written under contract, and the contract would tell you what had to be in the book. I'm sure this kind of book doesn't even exist anymore because today the sort of person who would have read that book would go and get a video.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember your titles?

LEBOWITZ

The only book I wrote all by myself was *House of Leather*. This publishing company had, if you can believe it, little publishing subsidiaries, depending on interests, but the biggest line was for heterosexual men. In books for this line, there could be no homosexual male sex—that was in the contract—

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but there had to be lesbian sex, and there had to be a certain amount of it. In the contract, it would say how often and how many words until there had to be sex again.

So it was very arduous writing. The first one I did by myself. After that I kind of subcontracted them out. Five people would come over and one person would type. We would get smashed, very stoned and we would just make stuff up, and if it had enough sex in it, you would get your money.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have a sense of your audience? Did you ever meet any of your readers?

LEBOWITZ

Not that I know of. I did about four of these books, so obviously the publisher thought I knew who I was writing for, but anyone could go in there. I was always looking for jobs, and someone had told me about it.

"I want to write a book."

"Okay."

They handed me a contract. There was a pile of them on the publisher's desk. They just handed it to you. If you put the right things in the book, they'd give you the check.

INTERVIEWER

There was no advance against royalties?

LEBOWITZ

No, there was no advance. You'd give them the book, they'd give you the money, and that was it. It was like driving a cab, only harder.

INTERVIEWER

Was this one of your first literary assignments?

LEBOWITZ

It was my first. But it really wasn't at all like writing. So the way I solved the sex problem in my novel is that there isn't any: no explicit sex.

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A writer that I think writes extremely well about sex, in a profound way, is John O'Hara, but there's no explicit sex. He's one of my favorite writers. To me, O'Hara is the real Fitzgerald. I think O'Hara is an underrated writer because every single person who knew him hated him. Everyone tells you stories about what a jerk he was, what an idiot, what a social climber, how awful he was: *O'Hara*. Did you know O'Hara? Uck—O'Hara. He was also an extremely popular writer and that probably hurt him, but mostly it was the fact that everyone hated him. As soon as all the people who knew him die off, people will come to share my opinion. Of course, this is a running battle with Joe Fox who knew him, loathed him, doesn't like his writing nearly as much as I do. Joe thinks that this is the weirdest thing about me.

INTERVIEWER

Appointment in Samara is one of the best American novels.

LEBOWITZ

I agree. He did the thing that students are told a writer should most aspire to: he made a whole world. A totally coherent world. I love him. I love his short stories. I love his weird books. I even love all the wrong books. I found a book of his called *Lovey Childs* in a second-hand bookstore in L.A. I had never even heard of this book. I called up Joe and asked if he'd ever heard of this book.

"There's no such book."

"Joe, I'm holding the book in my hand."

Joe's worked for Random House his whole life and he didn't even know that they had published it. This book never should have become a novel. I'm sure it was a short story that some editor wrongly told him to make into a novel.

INTERVIEWER

In general, why is it so difficult to write?

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LEBOWITZ

Because it's intrinsically difficult work. The only job that is worse is coal mining. All writers have a normal healthy amount of fear, but I have an excessive amount of fear.

INTERVIEWER

What is the fear about?

LEBOWITZ

For some people it's the fear of not being good enough, for others it's the fear of being good enough. It's tempting the gods to write. Think of the terrible attacks Philip Roth was subjected to early in his career, and even now. This is why people do horrible things to themselves when they are writing, punishing themselves so maybe someone else won't. I know someone who eats thousands of candy bars when he is working. His writing room smells like Hershey, Pennsylvania. I myself smoke so much while I'm writing that it's hard for me to make out what few words I've actually gotten down on paper.

All contemplation of oneself is unpleasant—even the contemplation of your own ideas is fairly nerve-racking—and that's what writing is. Also, in this era, writing has so little effect compared to when the novel was at the center of the culture. That kind of impact is totally impossible and you know it, so you have to believe in books as a kind of religion. The other kinds of things you used to get by being a writer are no longer available. It's sad for us, but worse for the culture, because, no matter how many new forms of technology, the only way to introduce a new idea is through a book. Now, of course the chance of a given writer having a new idea is slim, but *should* they have one, that idea has to filter into the culture in a different way, through some horrible other medium, and if the idea is not destroyed, it does become distorted and vastly diminished. People truly unworthy of that idea will be the ones to set it before the society.

INTERVIEWER

Could this diversion of attention be beneficial?

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LEBOWITZ

How? People who are meant to become real writers are marginal enough already. Why else would they want to be writers? The only way someone can see something is by being outside it. A person who fits into the culture, who is truly acceptable to a society, would never become a writer in the profound sense of that word. Even Edith Wharton, who looked to be at the top of our society, was not truly acceptable because of her sensibility. That was marginalizing enough. She wasn't black or Latina or poor, and although those things can work in that direction, that isn't, contrary to popular opinion, the most important sort of distinction. What if someone wants to write about something else entirely? Luckily for us, homosexuality wasn't Oscar Wilde's direct subject. He didn't need a subject. Unlucky people have a subject thrust upon them. I can't think of a worse thing to be than a black writer, because to be a black writer means to be forced constantly to write about being black. Nothing could be more confining. I've always been grateful to be a second- rather than a first-generation American Jew, so I didn't have to be obsessed with my Jewish identity. Blacks in this country may never have that luxury.

INTERVIEWER

This all sounds so difficult. Why do you do it? What does it give back?

LEBOWITZ

The rewards of any warrior. The word that best describes my feeling of having written is *triumphant*—triumphant on the level of Alexander the Great. Having overcome your worst fear, the thing you are most vulnerable to, that is the definition of heroic.

Also, it's such a worthwhile human activity. The most.

Finally, no soldier ever came to me and said, You have to be a writer, but it was decided long ago that it was a given.

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So when I'm writing it's the only time I feel all right. It's the only time I feel justified. Whenever I am doing anything else, which is most of the time, even if it is not something like robbing a bank, I feel felonious. Writing is what I'm supposed to be doing.

—James Linville
George Plimpton

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from Elect Mr. Robinson for a Better World

Donald Antrim

It was Friday, the day of the big theriomorphism workshop Rotary luncheon out at the Holiday Inn. My wife, Meredith, and I and a crowd of red-faced Rotarians and their well-dressed wives (Rotary Anns) sat around hotel banquet tables and listened to a visiting anthropology professor at the junior college say, "Pick an animal, any animal, fish, fowl, beast. Concentrate on aspects of the animal. Is it big? Small? Cute? Does it eat other animals? What color fur? If the animal is a bird, what color are its feathers? What song does it sing?"

"This is stupid," I whispered to Meredith.

"It's your fault we're here, Pete. Why don't you give it a chance?"

The anthropologist said, "Why don't we all think about it for a minute? Okay, everybody got one?"

"Yes," "No," "Wait," people said. Meredith whispered, "What's yours?"

"I don't know, what's yours?"

"Coelacanth."

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"The prehistoric fish?"

"I need a volunteer," declared the professor. Meredith raised her hand, and the man at the podium said, "Yes, back there. Tell us your name and the name of the animal you've chosen to become today."

"Meredith Robinson. Coelacanth. It's a kind of fish that scientists believed extinct until one was caught off the coast of Africa."

"Excellent. Come forward. Sit here. Would someone please dim the lights?" I watched Rotary guys watch my wife. Bill Nixon, Tom Thompson, Abraham de Leon, Dick Morton, Terry Heinemann, Robert Isaac—all the usuals, plus others. Jerry and his wife, Rita, sat up front. The professor soothingly said, "Close your eyes, breathe deeply, and tell us about the coelacanth. Everybody else, let's all breathe deeply too, and be thinking about our own animals. Go ahead, Meredith."

"Well, it's four feet long, deep slate blue, with bony, protruding fins and big jaws with scary teeth. It goes back seventy million years. It moves slowly, it dwells in dark water." The professor nodded. Audience members inched forward in their seats. Meredith said, "At night it swims upside down with its head pointed to the sea bottom, bobbing along."

"A feeding technique?"

"Maybe."

"How's the water?" I could see Meredith's head settle forward as she softly answered, "Cold."

"Feel the cold. Breathe that cold. Inhale that water. What do you feel?"

"Colors."

"Colors?"

"Blue, black, indigo."

The anthropologist stepped from the stage and came forward into the crowd gathered around tables set with plates that were littered with discarded skeletons of poached red snapper (the luncheon's fish course, provided by Jerry and Rita); he collected white small bones from several plates and carried the bones back to the stage area and scattered them

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in a circle around my wife's chair. He produced a portable cassette deck and loaded a tape that played hollow drum rhythms. He intoned along with the drums, "There is a circle of sea and you are in it, Coelacanth, bobbing above the ocean floor where the lonely crab rests on rocks where no mollusk grows. Blue squid drift on black tides lit by lanternfish. The solitary shark pays a visit but that doesn't concern you. You are the last of the ancients. Swim your swim!"

I watched Meredith's head and shoulders gently moving. Rita Henderson clutched her husband's arm. Men I knew and others I didn't sat still with their wives, all focused on my wife's feet suddenly dancing like bottom fish above bone-strewn hotel carpet. The visiting professor commanded, "Rise, Coelacanth. Cavort in the blue cold."

Meredith did rise. She hopped from foot to foot inside her private bone circle, head hanging, arms shivering, hands with tapering fingers churning air—she was working up a sweat. People in the audience swayed along with the echoing taped drumbeats. Everywhere, heads oscillated and feet tapped. Abraham de Leon was particularly into it: his mouth fell open, his tongue wagged, his body visibly trembled. I couldn't imagine what kind of animal he was. And Tom Thompson! Unlike Abe, Tom did not tremble so much as quake. He bounced in his chair in a violent manner that caused other guests to stare at him and cough suggestively, but Tom was immersed in his own head and taking no notice; and soon the whole room was shaking to the sounds of drums getting louder and the instructor's voice calling out, "Single-celled protozoa, insects, small birds and wildfowl; warm-blooded animals and sleepy reptiles; crustacea, fish, aquatic mammalia—everybody join in with Meredith the Coelacanth, let's go, creatures, dance it!" Rotarians and their wives staggered from chairs and wobbled to the front of the room and encircled my wife in a bestial conga in which I alone did not participate. I remained at my table. I hadn't even chosen an animal.

The visiting professor came over and said, "Excuse me, is she with you?"

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"Yes."

"In some societies, special individuals are selected to enter alternate states of consciousness and ritually explore the spirit realm. Most of the people in that conga line merely imagine themselves as animals, but she's actually *become* her animal. I've seen it before. It's rare. She's a natural. She has a gift."

"Really?"

"I'd like to spend time with her, monitor her rhythms, observe entry conditions, coach her in the methodology of closure. The novice can easily become lost between worlds and, in rare cases, suffer psychotic episodes. Trance experience is something our culture doesn't prepare us for."

From the conga line: grunts and hoots rising above the rumbling of many feet. Meredith in the vortex danced. The professor said, "She's learning to swim."

"I was learning to swim," Meredith said later. Sweaty businessmen and their wives gathered around. All eyes were on my wife, who told the crowd, "Water held me. I was able to accept myself as a fish, and to feel the pain of living. I didn't need assurances that I was worthy of love."

And at home that night, she told me, "As a person, I always needed someone to hold me, but as a fish I was buoyant, able to hold myself. Now I'm a little buoyant, but I also need to be held, because I feel heavy inside. I miss the friends I made in the ocean."

We were lying in bed with the covers pulled up. We held cups of hot milk with honey.

"Friends?"

"Other coelacanths. More than friends, actually. One was my mother and one was my father, and I had schools of brothers and sisters. I knew them, and they knew me. They didn't wonder where I'd come from, because I'd always been there with them. As I am now. Even while lying with you, here, in our house, in our bed, I'm down there in cold water, swimming upside down, brushing against another coelacanth, making my presence felt and feeling the presence of another, before going off to a deep place to look for something precious."

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"Something precious?"

"A rock or a piece of coral. Something smooth, something shiny, something black."

Her breaths grew slow and deep, her breasts rose and fell. Katydids made scratchy noises in the pollenating mango outside our window. Wind blew a tree branch scraping clawlike against the house. A small time passed.

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Nicholas Christopher

from 5°

1

Displayed in the coin shop window
below the Spanish doubloons and Flemish guilders,
in a row of talismans on felt cushions,
a gold disc deflects a ray of moonlight.

The sea-green card beneath it reads:
DISC EMPLOYED BY JOHN DEE (1527–1608)
WHO TRIED TO LEARN THE SECRETS
OF NATURE FROM ANGELS.

This same John Dee, court mathematician,
was a close friend to Sir Walter Ralegh
and Thomas Harriot, the first man
to map the lunar surface with a telescope.

The language Dee invented for communicating
with angels he called "Enochian."
His partner, Edward Kelley, was a medium
and a forger, whose ears had been lopped off.

Coins of the realm were Kelley's specialty.
Later, he was murdered in prison.
Dee died impoverished, reduced to casting
horoscopes in a provincial town.

He was reputed to be the model for Prospero.
His gold disc is ringed with concentric circles.
A sun at its center; a cross; four stone archways.

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And hieroglyphics that hold the key
to what he learned from the angels,
which he never shared with anyone.

2

A man with a telescope on a marble runway
is shielding his eyes from the moon.
Like a match head, the Dog Star flares

over the island, famous for its marble quarry:
marble so plenteous it is used
in lieu of granite and concrete for everything

from the floors and stairways of the humblest
homes to this runway, hewn by a team of masons
and laid in place by farmers and fishermen

who wanted an air connection to the mainland.
Instead, the next year, they got the *Luftwaffe*,
first dropping paratroopers and then landing cargo

planes with wings dusted by snow crossing the Alps.
For two years the Nazis occupied the island,
a legion from Hell, in black, with armored cars,

flamethrowers, and attack dogs with iron teeth.
They built torture chambers in the town hall,
dynamited the church, and lopped off the mayor's ears.

They executed half the young men by firing squad
and flew the other half to Germany in dead of night.
When the Allies invaded the mainland and sent

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war ships to bombard the island, the Nazis fled
by air and were shot down over the sea.
Survivors washed up in the surf and the same farmers

and fishermen clubbed them to death with oars and shovels.
An obelisk streaked with salt marks the spot
where this occurred, with the names of the islanders

murdered during the occupation carved into the marble.
Meanwhile, the man with the telescope
(who is the son of two of those islanders—

lovers tracked down by the dogs, in a corn field,
after they violated curfew) is still waiting for
the plane to arrive bearing the film company that plans

to shoot *The Tempest* on location. The actor who will
play Prospero, learning his lines at that moment,
glances through the window at the island, so flooded

with moonlight it seems to lie underwater,
that whiter-than-white runway shining like a beacon,
as it once shone for the Germans, who in Berlin,

where *The Merchant of Venice* was performed nightly,
flung copies of *The Tempest* into their bonfires
while the dogs, in packs, barked from the rooftops.

3

Between the thick ice and the gray waters
of the lake there are seven inches
in which a man can breathe. So long as
he can tread water while tilting his head
upward at a forty-five-degree angle
indefinitely—until he freezes to death.

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Harry Houdini, in Chicago to expose a pair
of bogus mediums, took time out
to have himself submerged in Lake Michigan
straitjacketed and weighted with chains
inside a padlocked, cast-iron milk container.
He escaped his restraints in thirty seconds,
but then could not locate the opening
that had been sawed in the ice for him;
and for two hours, wearing only a bathing
suit, he paddled slowly, searching
for the way out of that water cold
enough to kill a man in ten minutes.

When he emerged without physical injury,
not even frostbite, he attributed it
to his "mastery of all bodily controls."
Then he returned to his hotel suite,
and after dinner took a very hot bath,
followed by a very cold one—as was his custom.

4

"Iron occurs native in meteorites" (according to
the dictionary), "and is vital to biological processes."
Brought to the bloodstream from the farthest reaches

of the solar system. Only in meteorites is iron
found uncombined with other elements.
Tonight a meteor shower streams out of the chaotic

glitter of the stars. When stray dogs congregate
on the rooftops of abandoned tenements, the yellow
moon casts their shadows for an entire city block.

In ancient Egypt, Anubis, the dog-headed god, led
souls down a torch-lit stairway to the underworld
and wore beads of meteoric iron around his neck.

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Iron coins were placed under the tongues of the dead
in Crete to pay the stone-eyed ferryman Charon
for passage across the River Styx. In Rome, too,

where all gems and minerals beneath the earth's
surface were, by law, the property of Pluto,
god of the dead: iron and coal, opals and lapis.

Then, as now, grave robbers preferred above-ground
mausoleums: no digging; just a padlock to pick
and a casket to pry open. After which, shunning

the coin within its cage of clamped teeth, they
slipped bracelets and rings from skeletal hands
that shared a single trace element with meteorites:

iron, forged in the icy furnaces beyond Pluto—
beyond the Dog Star—where darkness is no longer
visible, and even the gods of the dead fear to go.

5

At the public library the gushing gutter water
has frozen in the gargoyles' mouths.
Arcs of silver shot through with black.
How long will it take to crack their iron jaws?

In the stacks of the sub-basement,
in absolute darkness, on a shelf too high
to reach, there is a copy of Hesiod's
Works and Days, dusted with black snow,

in which can be found a definition
of The Iron Age of mankind, which still applies:
"By day, they toil and grieve unceasingly;
by night, they waste away painfully and die."

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The last and worst age of the world, Hesiod calls it,
in which men thrive on selfishness and deceit
until the gods destroy them in a single generation,
"causing babies to be born with graying hair."

After which their carcasses are carried off
by harpies and dropped the distance an anvil
might free-fall for ten days and nights,
into the sub-basement of the underworld,

where griffons, centaurs, and hippogriffs
(whom Ariosto claims hail from "iron mountains
far beyond the icebound seas") reign supreme.
And the gargoyles on the icy ledges gush fire.

6

In 1910 Houdini was the first man to fly
an airplane successfully in Australia.
It was a biplane, which he bought in France
and took with him to Melbourne on a ship.
during the entire voyage, he was seasick,
yet he spent all his free time
in the cargo hold, in darkness,
sitting at the controls of his plane.
He had *Houdini* painted on the fuselage
and wings in bold red letters.

In Melbourne he gave two performances nightly.
He made a full-grown elephant disappear onstage.
He caused the top hat of a man
in the back row to fill with gold coins.
He had himself submerged, straitjacketed
and handcuffed, in a tank of ice water.
Then he would leave his wife
at their hotel and hurry to a desert

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airstrip to spend the night in his plane.
He kept this up for weeks, barely sleeping,
waiting for the weather to clear.

On the evening of February 18th, a huge crowd
watched him leap manacled from Queen's Bridge
into the muddy waters of the Yarra River.
Moments later, a corpse floated to the surface.
Believing this was Houdini, the crowd panicked,
and when Houdini himself, free of manacles,
rose to the surface soon afterward,
he was so startled by this apparition
that he couldn't swim and had to be hauled
forcibly into a rowboat by his attendants.

Finally, on March 16th at 5 A.M., under cloudless
skies, he took off in his plane, circled
the field, and made a perfect landing.
He completed three flights that day,
covering seven miles at an altitude of 100 feet.
At each stop, cheering crowds greeted him.
In April, he made four more flights
before crashing outside Sydney on the 22nd.
He walked away from the wrecked plane unscathed.
And unshaken. Telling his wife that over
the previous month he had not slept at all.

"I now seem to have lost the habit," he said.
To his journal he confided that history
would now remember him, not as a magician,
but as an aviation pioneer.
During the entire voyage home, he was seasick.
He never flew again.

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Irving Feldman

Variations on a Theme by May Swenson

In memory of May

"Feel me to do right," your father whispered
to you out of the blue of two silences:
his shyness, his dying. How beautifully
the words bespoke their reticence, implying
they said all there was to say . . . only doing
remained—to do—and feeling, to be felt.
And surely he felt he'd said enough and was done,
might turn his thought elsewhere, for now he read
once more from the pure page of his closed lids,
translating as he went into Absolute.
His clear gift became your clouded legacy
—for there the riddle of his remains lay open
and shut to your anxious conjecturing,
and here were all of you trying to reach him
by following instructions, asking and asking,
"What do you mean? What is it we're to do?
And is that your order? Or supplication?
Or both together?—as if you are at once
above and below us, nowhere, everywhere . . . dad?"

Alone among the stragglers and bystanders at
his bedside—the late beginners, you his children
moving by timid inches into middle age,—
he had, though lying here, accomplished already
his first great stride toward rebirth: he was dying.
And now he was running to get there, each step
swifter, less encumbered—he'd thrown off every tie,
was breaking free, while your infinite regress
of half measures pursued itself vainly and

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your sorrow clung uselessly to his soaring, to
his skidding—endless, sickening;—a last point
of life in him, unloosed, swelled into terrible
momentum, massive, too fast, dragged him gasping.
Would he never crash and come to a stop?
He flailed for foothold, handhold, anything . . . he prayed
for mercy, to be as light as nothing is
everywhere, a lucid serene transparency.
He was plunging, falling into an enormous
dark loop and a narrow corner where he caught,
lying there, frightened, failing, an old man
who couldn't get through, to whom nothing was clear.
But he grasped what grasped him—this knot, riddle:
his life, whole life, this moment, here. Pulled it tight
—"Feel me to do right," he cried out in the blue.

His voice so low it might have been a last breath,
his words adrift among you in a dream sentence's
phantom clarity you were wrestling toward sense
—but though it clung everywhere in the room,
again and again it ran away from your hands . . .
"Dad? Dad?" you called to him to waken yourselves.
Empty, estranged, powerless now to invoke,
the word passed over his still lips, his closed lids.
He seemed, so intent was his serenity,
so austere, to be listening for something else.
And you, struggling under the pure gravity
of his indifference, unable to bear him here,
you understood at last that understanding
him meant you had to do as he was doing.
All of you were falling in place like the dead.
And now it came and gathered and clarified in you:
so in a mother's heart a name swells and grows,
a droplet of its infinite preciousness
her murmur instills in her sleeping child
to be its own soul—so you and you and you,
his children, were whispering into his silence
now, "'Feel me to do right'—is that it, dad?"

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Before the dead we are all in the wrong,
although we know and swear we've done nothing wrong.
We shift from foot to foot, fidget, stare off,
unable to grasp what doesn't hold us,
our sheer life too impatient, too clumsy and loud
to feel anything not itself, to enter
with them into a world without dimension.
We hurry away, abandoning in our turn
the scene of our abandonment, saying that
every one of us shall be put right again when
our separate ways gather at the end of the road.
And until then?—you kept returning for him,
but he was not to be found among his words,
or waiting for you, a meaning at the end
of the broken, dim path of their expiration
—and yet like a name these words could summon him
into your mouths on your tongues from your lips:
droplet and knot, clear droplet and dark knot,
too clear to see, too enduring to untie
—your talisman with you under your breaths,
carried everywhere to be whispered when you
are in the wrong, alone, bereft, dying
to give yourselves up for undone, mud, no one.

Revolving the parts among yourselves,
you will go on saying to one another
time after time, "Remember what dad said!"
"What dad said? I *don't* remember—honest!"
"Dad? What dad *said*? Hmn. Did dad say something?"
"Yes, I . . . feel . . . it's right . . . here on the tip . . . of
. . . no!"
"Oh, we give up. Tell us! What *did* dad say?"
—you will (smiling in darkness) say as if to stop
the earth from turning, playing to delay the sun,
the sun's rising, and protract night and death
in unendurable unendingness until
the moment all of you shall join your voices
and dad sings out of your mouths, 'Feel me to do right.'"

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Five Poems by David Lehman

Shock Therapy

No gentle way of breaking the news: you turn on the TV
And see the rocket's red glare: the capsule explodes,
The astronauts tumble down, and the anchorpeople
Look solemn, saying, "The nation grieves tonight."
Sure it does, Buster, snorted the man with the pencil
mustache,
Lying on the shabby, unmade bed in this most mediocre
Of motels in New Mexico. When did we stop believing that life
Was real? Was it when we let these puppets do the living for us,
As if the esthetic credo of the French symbolists
Could somehow work for us today? The questions were meant
To be ignored, which made them definitively rhetorical, but she,
His first wife, insisted on asking them anyway. She shared
His love of noble gestures and hopeless causes
Such as the idea of romantic love in a pragmatic era
When the macrostructure no longer values that unit
Of individual gratification. There was a time, not very long ago,
When it didn't seem that way. It was the age of innocence
In a double sense, and we must have needed it badly, or else
We'd have never grown up to regret the spoiling of the planet,
The shrinking of the garden, near the graves where children play.

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Infidelity

1

She went to his head like a double martini at a bar
Where gangsters gather after a hit. She wanted his baby.
They sat at a corner table, quarreling about money,
When the full force of her passion hit him at last.

He couldn't get enough of her. He wanted her
And would always want her, though his daydreams implied
A future without her. Theirs would be a civilized affair;
They would part, go home, and divorce their spouses

On the appointed day. They were just using each other,
Afraid of losing each other, but that didn't matter.
This was their chance to be young again forever,

And he knew he would never forget her fragrance
Or the scent of death in the hotel room full of flowers,
Her dress in the closet, as he stepped in the door.

2

Why couldn't she be happy with what they had?
Everyone recommended it: her lawyer, his bartender,
Her mother, his priest. He kissed her hard
On the mouth, then stood there with a goofy grin

While she put her hand in his pants, and he
Couldn't resist her, or bear to look at her later,
And she—she thought he had some fucking nerve
To treat her like that, ignoring her at the party,

And never introducing her to his friends. Who did he
Think he was? She called him up to say she loved him
And wondered why he was living with this pallid woman

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Who answered the phone. Out of what archaic notion
Of honor, or gratitude for kindnesses and kisses past,
Long past? "You'll be happier loving me," she said.

3

She wanted to write a novel. He gave her *Madame Bovary*,
Anna Karenina, and Nabokov's *King, Queen, Knave*. In each
The heroine dies, she noticed. She called him up to say
Love is a verb and I want you inside me, baby. Had he

Ever loved her? Would he ever love her again? And then
Came the anxiety, whose circumference was nowhere,
And depression, when cause and effect got all mixed up
In her brain: she'd feel guilty so she'd get a ticket

For speeding. When she called him to tell him off,
She meant to say she loved him, because he was
The American in this British novel: tight-lipped, hungover,

Whose wife won't sleep with him and whose mistress
Hangs up on him, making him feel guilty, because
Why couldn't he be happy with what they had?

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Sexism

The happiest moment in a woman's life
Is when she hears the turn of her lover's key
In the lock, and pretends to be asleep
When he enters the room, trying to be
Quiet but clumsy, bumping into things,
And she can smell the liquor on his breath
But forgives him because she has him back
And doesn't have to sleep alone.

The happiest moment in a man's life
Is when he climbs out of bed
With a woman, after an hour's sleep,
After making love, and pulls on
His trousers, and walks outside,
And pees in the bushes, and sees
The high August sky full of stars
And gets in his car and drives home.

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The Return

It had taken him long enough but now
He was an American. The years of effort had paid off.
He knew all about the pennant races and the Academy Awards
And was off on a great adventure, which would take him
West of the Mississippi River and east of the dark unknown,
Where the land yielded moistly to his gentle pressure
And any jerk in a drugstore could grow up to be president,
Then considered a glamorous ambition. He woke up
Hungry and hungover as the bus pulled in.
Half an hour later, they were on the road again,
Everyone singing "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze."
Soon he found himself in the city of his birth, which used to be Chicago
And had now become New York. No wonder it felt different.
The young people had all been replaced by strangers.
Gone were the gangs of his boyhood, the spat blood and desecrated prayer shawls.
There was the time he fought a guy with a knife, protecting his sister:
His moment of glory in an alley off Nagle Avenue,
After which he never again punched anyone out but was himself mugged twice
And burglarized on a third occasion, and when his next door neighbor
Killed herself with pills, it was he who discovered the body.
He had tried to make sense of her on the basis of what he could hear through the walls—
The kind of music she liked, Sixties hard rock, Cream, the Doors—
And what she was wearing and what she was doing the one time she asked him over.
Enough of that. It wasn't his fault. He looked around him, sober but not for long.
The men on the bar stools with bald spots on the top of their heads

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Were high-risk candidates for heart attacks,
Especially if they worked in advertising, being creative with the Coca-Cola account
Before it was snatched away by an upstart West Coast agency with MTV on its brains.
"Advertising once had soul," the bald guy was saying.
His wife had the glazed look of a wife
Who has heard it before, nursing a glass of Chardonnay on the rocks.
It was sad to see them here, in the hip expensive uptown bar,
And it was getting him down, though if he tried he could still feel
A surge of the old inflated male confidence,
The conviction that everything would make better sense if only he were in charge.
The woman ordered another drink. Tipsy now, she kept calling him by the wrong name
As if he were an alumnus of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs
With a thing about Jews. It was her way of flirting with him, but it left him wondering
Whether he had fucked the wrong woman once again. It took him a long time
To get over her—he surprised himself by the stamina of his passion—
But the time had come to talk of many things, the hypothesis
Of a new life foremost among them, contingency clauses and all.
We have so little time, why waste it on self-fulfilling theories
When we could be out on the town, conducting the American experiment
With happiness at this late date in our century? There were
Theories for everything. It didn't much matter in the end.
Terrorists planted a bomb in the World Trade Center killing five hospitalizing one thousand
And he mentioned the bomb to the elevator man, Roy, who said,
"It wasn't big enough." This was New York, and it was great

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To be here at the center of the crisis, chatting excitedly with
fellow straphangers
Of such infinite variety, how could you want to be anywhere
else?
So he ate his daily bread and drank his nightly wine,
And she couldn't find her diaphragm case in the morning,
And he missed her love, and even the things she did to get
his goat
Like finishing his sentences and always being right.
It was amazing—the power of a single vodka Gibson at five
o'clock.
Knowing she was a sucker for a wild romantic gesture, he
turned at the door and said,
"Darling, I've canceled my flight to Paris. Will you marry
me?"
"Yes," she said, surprising them both. The first time
She fell in love was the first time it had happened to anyone.
He felt like gliding down the aisles of the darkened theater
as the final kiss fills up the screen.

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Precocity

The boy had a group of freckle-faced friends
Who lived nearby. He gave them names, taught them games.
They loved him. He had a sweet nature, sang show tunes
In the car with Mama while Daddy drove grimly on,

Turned sullen after the divorce. Couldn't sleep alone
Or with the lights off. More stoical, too: didn't cry when
Stunned by a softball in the face. He now had a secret life
And closed the door of his room while he dressed.

It was his birthday. He went to Fort Tryon Park, walked,
Explored the caves, rolled down the grassy slopes.
When he went home, his mother asked him if he was happy.

He said yes, afraid he would otherwise wound her,
And daydreamed about masked heroes in comic books.
His mother loved him. He felt like Richard Nixon.

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Two Poems by Rafael Campo

Café Pamplona

I know this really isn't Spain. But still,
You'd think I'd find my father here, his lips
On every cup. You'd think the holly bush
Weren't quite so sharp. I think Rumanian
Is coming from my favorite table in
The back. Are all these people reading Lorca?
My Father never orders flan. I have
Café con leche. I'm in Santander,
Before the war. These people reading Lorca
Suspect that he's a Communist. You'd think
The Germans at the table in the back
Would carry out their spying more discreetly.
My father hates the Fascists, but more the Communists.
You'd think I'd find my father somewhere, but
He says he never trusted poets. All
These people reading Lorca would disgust him.
Communists and homosexuals, he'd say.
I order flan. I know this isn't Spain.
The waiter is a hand on every saucer,
Clearing tables, wearing white. You'd think
I'd find him, lips on every wide-lipped cup.
I'm not in Santander. The Civil War
Is over. Lorca's dead. All these people know
The holly bush is sharp. You'd think they'd guess
I'm Spanish, since it's clear I can't forget.

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Age 5 Born with AIDS

In Jaime's picture of the world, a heart
As big as South America shines out,
The center of the only ocean. Three
Stick figures (one is labelled "me") are drawn
Beside the world, as if such suffering
Could make us more objective. Jaime's bald
And has no mouth. His parents aren't like him:
They have red lips and crazy yellow hair,
And grin. There is no title for his work
Of art, except the names we give ourselves.

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Piltdown Man, Later Proved to Be a Hoax

Ralph Lombreglia

Down at the asylum, the best-behaved patients were out walking around loose, roaming the grounds in their bathrobes and pajamas or sitting on benches staring at the road. Some wore regular clothes, but you could tell they were patients whenever a car went by. Patients had a special way of watching a car. They followed its path as though it magnetized their faces, their heads swiveling together in sync; they gazed down the empty road long after the car was gone, as though, like a movie in reverse, it might come reeling back. Only a tiny old man ignored the cars altogether. He was off by himself on the lawn beneath the massive gray buildings, making his way among the flower beds in his tattered blue robe. At each bed he knelt to speak to the plants, putting his lips close to specific flowers, gesturing to make himself understood. I could see the pain it was causing him that blossom after blossom failed to respond, the umbrage he was taking. Finally he began to cry. He wrenched a clump of daffodils from the ground and lashed them into slivers against a nearby rock.

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I was across the road behind a tree. I'd just hiked down from the mountaintop where my family lived—down the old deer-hunters' path and across a field—and I was hiding behind one of the big maples lining the hospital road. Every minute or so I stepped out and stood beside its trunk and waved to the patients on the lawn, and they waved back to me. I hid behind the tree for a minute before coming out to do it again. It was a game I'd been playing with the patients since the beginning of spring. First they would see a cornfield and trees, then a dark-haired twelve-year-old boy, then only trees and a cornfield again. They loved things like that. This time a few patients hid behind trees on their side of the road too, but they lost track of the game and forgot to come out.

I was already late getting over to my friend Clayton's house. When I crossed the road, patients flocked to me like ducklings. It always surprised me to see how quickly they could move. They were terribly gaunt. Even the stout ones seemed gaunt somehow, around the mouth and eyes. I knew they had food to eat because I ate it myself; Clayton's mother worked in the hospital kitchens and gave us whatever the patients were having. Maybe they just did the wrong things with it. Many of the men had dried egg-yolk patches in the stubble on their cheeks.

I revealed a few secrets to them. "The fish refuse to have their pictures taken," I said. "The bumblebees are meeting to decide what to do." The patients nodded enthusiastically. "There's a city in the sky," I added, looking up at the sliding clouds. "They're having a party today."

They were eager to tell me things in return. "The doctors play violins all night and never let us sleep," one patient said. Another said, "They have factories on the moon where they make all the money." "They're selling our sunsets to the Chinese nation," I was informed by a third.

I knew these things—they'd told me already—but I put on a good show of surprise and indignation. Then I said good-bye and proceeded across the lawn. The man in the blue robe was still kneeling by the rock, gaping at his scraps of yellow flower

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on the grass. "I'll be back soon with rubies and diamonds," I called to him over my shoulder. He looked up at me, and for a second he forgot his troubles. The patients hiding behind the trees were still pretending I wasn't there. Out of courtesy, I pretended the same thing about them.

•

The asylum occupied a gigantic parcel of state-owned land bisected by a brook that bubbled amid the Gothic gray buildings where people went to live when they lost their minds. The place was much larger than any nearby town, and it suggested boundless bureaucratic mystery as you drove past it on the road—as though a medieval principality had sprung up from dung in the cow country forty miles west of Manhattan. In my whole first summer on the mountain I never saw the asylum except that way, as a passenger in my parents' cars. They had forbidden me to go down there to play.

My father owned fifty acres of land on the mountain overlooking the asylum—not the whole mountain, as Clayton always said to embarrass me. Compared to real mountains like the Rockies it was just a hill, but for New Jersey it was a mountain. We'd moved there the summer before, between my sixth and seventh grades, to escape the black people my father said were taking over our native city of Newark. My father had been driving an oil truck in Newark when I was born, but he'd worked his way up till he had his own heating-fuel company in the city. He sold it to start another one in the sticks of Jersey and built us a house on the land he'd bought, where he envisioned a whole mountaintop development of superior homes. So far ours was the only one. In his flight to the country my father was ahead of his time; no one else was ready to buy lots for houses that far away from everything except a lunatic asylum. That was why the asylum was there, my mother said, because it was the middle of nowhere. She, too, had wanted to get out of Newark but thought the state hospital was a fatal flaw in my father's plan. She'd

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heard bad stories about the asylum, including the one about the escaped patient who had appeared the previous year on the streets of a neighboring town—barefoot and crazy and brandishing a razor blade.

Our new house was surrounded by acres of wooded land, yet when the leaves fell off the trees that first autumn I could see, on the horizon, small but unmistakable, the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. I could see the hospital, too, down in the foreground, where Clayton lived in the workers' barracks. School had begun, and Clayton—my only classmate from our remote corner of the township—had become my closest friend. My parents were unhappy about this turn of events, but they'd had to relent and allow me to play at the hospital with him. Working for the asylum made Clayton's parents employees of the state, and the state took care of its people—or so his mother, Mrs. Parker, always said. She liked the state for the way it helped her raise her family. The Parkers had five children, Clayton and four younger girls. "I don't know how we could ever do for them *out there*," Mrs. Parker had told me, meaning out in the world where my family lived.

We didn't have this concept of the benevolent state in our house on the mountain. My father worked for himself and did not like the state. He said the state was hurting the hospital workers by giving them too much and taking their incentive away, and this was the only connection I ever heard my father make between himself and the hospital people, because the state was hurting him as well, with taxes and regulations that seemed designed to keep a man from being ambitious and doing business.

I believed him about his taxes, but I didn't get the part about the workers having too much. As far as I could see, they didn't have anything and never would. Their barracks lay huddled in a grassy basin at the edge of the hospital grounds—scores of chalky, lime-green lozenges like an Army encampment, each the size of two railroad cars with a small brick porch at either end. When I first went down to play with Clayton in the fall, I didn't understand how two whole fami-

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lies, not just one, could live in each of those barracks buildings. The rooms were small and dark; there was a tiny stove and a sink, but not really a kitchen. Once, when we were filthy from jumping into the cinder pit, I asked Clayton how many times a week he took a bath, and he said he'd never taken a bath in his life. He laughed when I didn't get the joke: the barracks had no bathtubs, only showers.

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I ran down the grassy slope and across the parking lot. Clayton answered when I knocked on the flimsy barracks door, his big-toothed smile floating in the dim entrance of his shabby house. His parents worked on Saturdays, and his sisters were out playing somewhere. It was getting toward lunch, but it seemed he'd just gotten up. He came out into the sunny parking lot blinking his eyes.

"Weren't you expecting me?" I said.

"Sure," said Clayton, looking at the sky. "I was expecting you."

We talked about what to do. The choices were not infinite, and we'd end up doing them all anyway—playing in the tunnels, getting lunch from Clayton's mother, buying stuff at the hospital store, jumping in the cinder pit—so the only question was in what order. I was trying to think of a way to avoid the pit altogether today. Clayton had vowed to push me off the highest part of the cliff the next time we went there.

"Let's go down in the tunnels," I said.

"Too nice out," said Clayton.

"Let's go look at the cows. We never do that anymore."

"I don't want to see any cows. Let's go to the pit."

Our game at the cinder pit was to pretend we were paratroopers—sprinting from the road's edge to the cliff and then leaping out into empty space. Clayton jumped into the pit's deepest place, where the drop was more than twenty feet. I stuck to the shallow end where it was less than ten. Clayton lived for danger, which was one of the main differences be-

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tween us. The other main difference was that he was black. For a long time I assumed that black people liked danger more than white people did because I didn't have anybody to compare Clayton to. He was the only black student in our entire school.

"I'm not going off the high end, Clayton."

"Oh, Gabe," he said, because I disliked that nickname. "I was only kidding about that."

The springtime grass was tender and pale green as we crossed a lawn into the park-like center of the asylum. We took the tree-lined boulevard past white gazebos and a concrete bandshell where the patients heard music in the summertime. The forsythia were greened-over already, but azaleas still burned like gas jets at the base of every stone-faced building—as though Mr. Parker, an asylum groundskeeper, had gone around adjusting them like the flames of his own little stove at home. The hospital's reservoir sparkled in the distance, a polished blue platter in an evergreen grove. Puffs of steam rose from metal grates in the grass, the exhaust from the tunnels that connected the whole hospital underground, and in the steam I caught the sour institutional smell of the subterranean kitchens where Clayton's mother cooked.

From one of the towering gray buildings, a voice called to us. When we looked up, we saw a woman on the fifth or sixth floor, a paper-white face behind the bars of her window. Framed by stone blocks, she resembled a plant trying to grow beneath the dark weight of a rock. Only a few hospital structures had bars on their windows; these were the buildings for the criminally insane. Clayton said that the people behind those bars had done especially nasty things, like killing their entire families.

"I know who you are," the woman called out, slipping her arm through the bars and pointing at us. Her hair hung in oily strings.

We walked to the base of her building. "We know who you are, too," I said, pointing back at her.

This pleased her immensely. She clapped her hands and

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left her window. When she came back, she had a plate of spaghetti in her hands. She held it up for us to see.

"That looks good," Clayton said. "You're supposed to eat that." He rubbed his belly for emphasis.

She spilled the spaghetti out through the bars. It slid down the building, a shimmering trail of sauce and noodles on the stone facade.

"There goes your lunch," I called to her in a scolding voice.

"There goes my lunch," she called back with enormous joy.

We left her and walked on toward the pit.

"What do you think it's like?" I asked Clayton. "Being crazy like her."

"I think it's like being high!" he said.

"What do you know about being high?"

"I've seen lots of high people. What do you think it's like?"

"I think it's like being on another planet. Mars, say!"

Clayton just shook his head.

"You think we'll ever get like that woman?" I asked him.

"You will, for sure," he said. "It runs in your family."

"You don't go crazy from having it run in your family."

"Don't you know anything? Going crazy is a hereditary thing. Everybody knows that. Count on it."

A few years before this, my father's father had become senile. He started traveling across the city of Newark to see people who were no longer alive, stopped strangers on the street and claimed to be their friend. He thought his reflection in the mirror was another person, and sometimes he didn't recognize his wife. He was only fifty-seven years old when they took him away, and that was the thing my folks marveled over with their friends, the way a person's mind could evaporate at any time. My grandfather lived in a home where they kept him on drugs all day. My parents had taken me to visit him, and I'd seen the miserable situation he was in. I'd bragged to Clayton about how bizarre it was—the way he had his meals in a high chair like a baby and didn't even know my name.

"Well, what about *your* family?" I said now. "How about your old man? Talk about crazy!"

"Yeah, but he's not *crazy* crazy," Clayton said.

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The school we attended was a bad place twelve miles away, populated by greasers and hoods and sniffers of glue. I should have lasted five minutes there, but I arrived in the same van that brought Clayton to school, and I was shielded by his protective coloration. The nastiest thugs left Clayton alone, though they despised black people in theory. It was rumored that I, too, lived at the lunatic asylum. Clayton and I allowed this mistake to go uncorrected.

My friendship with Clayton consisted of little riffs we played over and over, but the special seal and symbol of our brotherhood was a prehistoric being known as Piltdown Man. Early in the year our teacher, Mr. Marsh, had done a lesson on him in history class. They'd unearthed Piltdown Man's skull in England somewhere. It had the cranium of a human and the jaw of an ape, and this made Piltdown Man the original human being, the missing link, the hairy angel who'd vaulted evolution's monkey-chasm to become the thing we were today. Single-handedly, Piltdown Man had crossed the dark threshold into species-hood.

Mr. Marsh taught us this in his usual boring way, but then something inspired the man. It hit him that *he* should become Piltdown Man to show us, and this he did brilliantly — stooping over to half his height so that his arms slid out of his jacket sleeves, swinging his arms ape-fashion, grunting and bellowing as he lurched back and forth the length of the blackboard. He was a tall, goofy man with a crewcut and a bad complexion, and he was perfect as the man-beast responsible for all humanity. Clayton and I regarded each other with bugged-out eyes, our heads nodding up and down. *Yes, yes!* our startled faces said. *This is the real stuff! Check this out!*

Nobody said anything out loud. Nobody laughed. The whole class was transfixed by Piltdown Man. Because the insane were never far from my mind, I wondered if Mr. Marsh was ready to come live at the asylum himself. Students around me started cackling. Clayton had joined Mr. Marsh at the

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dawn of human time. He was up from his desk, hunched over and grunting in the back of the room, doing a stunning black version of Piltdown Man.

The two of them carried on this way for a minute, groaning and gesturing to each other across the room. It was Mr. Marsh's most successful interaction with Clayton. The big white ape-man cast his eyes around the classroom. "Piltdown Man!" he boomed, straightening up to become *Homo erectus* again. "Later proved to be a hoax."

We sat with idiotic grins on our faces.

"Hoax?" Clayton finally said, still dangling his arms. "What hoax you talking about?"

"Piltdown Man," said Mr. Marsh. "Discovered, nineteen eleven. Proved to be a hoax, nineteen fifty-three. Those bones turned out to be fake."

"What!" Clayton cried out.

"That's right," Mr. Marsh said with enormous satisfaction. Astonishing Clayton, laying Clayton flat out with disbelief, was the greatest pedagogical achievement he could hope to have in our class.

"With people believing in him all that time?" Clayton said, returning to his desk. "Nineteen eleven to nineteen fifty-three?"

"Yup," said Mr. Marsh.

"How could anybody do that?" I said. "Make fake bones like that?"

"Well, they were very clever," Mr. Marsh answered with a smile. "Kind of like you guys," he added, which brought some chuckles from the class.

"Bull*shit*!" Clayton said.

The girls gasped, and the boys snorted like little pigs. "I don't want to hear that again, Clayton," Mr. Marsh said glumly—probably the three hundredth time he'd uttered that phrase. Like all the teachers at our school, Mr. Marsh had to take great care not to appear to be picking on Clayton.

"You told us Piltdown Man was real," Clayton stated.

"I did not," Mr. Marsh replied.

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I said, "You showed us how he walked and everything!"

Mr. Marsh turned to face me. "Gabriel," he said kindly, "I was showing the class what people *thought* Piltdown Man was like. When they believed in him."

"Well, how are we supposed to figure that out!" Clayton cried. "You're supposed to be teaching us stuff, and instead you're getting us all confused!"

Mr. Marsh leaned on the blackboard's eraser tray and rubbed his eyes.

"Did they get in trouble?" one of the girls asked. "The people who did the hoax?"

"They never found out who did it," said Mr. Marsh.

"They never got caught?" the girl exclaimed.

"They got away with it?" cried one of her friends.

"Yes," he said, looking at Clayton and me. "They got away with it." He stared over our heads. "The perpetrators of that hoax took the secret to their graves," he said, as if to himself.

His remark chilled the room. Being in one's grave nullified the triumph of not getting caught, and the class settled down. Mr. Marsh opened his English book and started diagramming sentences on the board. But Clayton did not agree that history was over. He raised the wooden top of his desk and put his head inside. The metal book-cavity was empty and made an echo-chamber for his voice. "*Piltdown Man!*" he bellowed. Mr. Marsh spun around.

"I don't want to hear that again, Clayton," Mr. Marsh declared.

My own desk had books and papers inside, ruining my echo. "*Later proved to be a hoax!*" I cried, but it came out muffled and indistinct.

We were sent to the principal's office. I was brave until they separated me from Clayton. Clayton was brave the whole time. He'd been to the principal's office many times before. The principal told me that if we ever again called Mr. Marsh "Piltdown Man" we would be expelled. "We weren't calling *him* Piltdown Man," I said, "we were saying it about ourselves," and only in saying this did I understand it was true. The principal didn't get the point.

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We stopped making our joke in class. But like dogs we kept returning to it—roaming the halls and playgrounds in the Piltdown crouch, grunting and hollering his name followed always by the heart-wrenching "Later proved to be a hoax!" Piltdown Man became our universal sign of everything the world contained. The authors of our textbooks were Piltdown Men, our classmates were Piltdown persons, all schools and governments and works of men were frauds.

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The cinder pit was just off the public road that looped the hospital grounds. The pit resembled a quarry. Bulldozers moved the glistening blackness and loaded it into trucks for the asylum's icy roads in winter. The cinders themselves were a loose, oddly lightweight substance, like crushed pumice stone, but dirty. Walking across the pit, you sank past your ankles and the coarse, sooty grit filled your shoes. It was a filthy place to play. The cinders turned my skin jet black, which my mother bemoaned when I fouled her tub and washing machine, but which gave Clayton as much pleasure as seeing me blush in school. Cinder-soot didn't make his skin any darker, and he couldn't turn red in the face. Nothing showed up on Clayton.

The pit was a prehistoric place where Piltdown Man would have felt at home. I always thought of him when we went there, that cave dweller no one believed in anymore. I stood on the cliff and imagined Piltdown Man on the desolate black plain below, wandering the primeval landscape in his crouch, human but not really, hunting and foraging, his eye out for a mate, never imagining that someday people would call him a hoax.

We took a few jumps off the cliff, me from the shallow end, Clayton from the thrilling peak, plunging knee-deep into the granular stuff and then scrambling back up the side to do it again. When I wasn't looking, Clayton grabbed me in a headlock and dragged me to the highest place. He said he would count to three, but he jumped on two. I went over

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head first, fell short into the scooped-out face of the pit, and somersaulted twenty feet down. When Clayton saw I wasn't dead, he laughed. I was still struggling out of the cinders when a voice spoke to us.

"That was a brave one, that time," the voice said. "That one was good."

We looked up and saw him emerge from the trees, a tall black man in the baggy gray uniform that patients wore when they worked outdoors. He'd been hiding in the woods beyond the pit, watching us drop into the soft, receiving lap of pulverized darkness.

"Let me have a look at these young fellows," he said on his way toward us. "Oh, these are two fine young Negroes. Two fine-looking Negro boys."

"He's not a Negro." Clayton said.

"Of course he is," the man said. "Look at that rich, dark skin."

"That's dirt," Clayton said. "He's white. I'm black."

"Oh," the man said, sidestepping away as if afraid of me. "Can we trust him?" he asked Clayton.

"Maybe," Clayton said.

"Sure, you can trust me," I said.

"How do I know?" said the man.

I didn't answer. Instead, I hunched my shoulders and dangled my hands at the ground, and started walking around like Piltdown Man. My knuckles brushed the cinders as I slogged across the pit. I heard grunting and looked up to find Clayton doing it with me. We lumbered around like space-baboons on a shimmering black moon. The man's mouth gaped open as he watched.

"What's that!" he cried.

"What's what?" I said.

"What you're doing!"

"We're not doing anything."

"You're doing something!"

"We're just being normal," Clayton said. "You trying to make us feel bad? We can't help the way we are."

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For a second the man got serious and spooky, then he gave us a sly face and started walking like Piltdown Man, too. He made us look like amateurs. Compared to him, we didn't even know how to do it. Even Mr. Marsh couldn't come close.

"Nice!" said Clayton "Very nice!"

"You're the missing link!" I said.

The man jumped back. "Who said I was missing?"

"Nobody said you were missing, man," Clayton said. "Be cool."

"Why did he say I was missing?"

"He was talking about something else. Nobody's missing."

"Nobody knows you've escaped," I said.

The man stared at me. Then he started to laugh.

"How long you been in this joint?" Clayton asked him.

He thought about this with some amusement. "I forget," he finally said. "What are you boys' names?"

We told him our names. He shook our hands in an elaborate way, enveloping them with his left hand while shaking with his right. "My name is Luther," he told us.

"You shake hands like a king," I said. "I'll bet you're a king." I'd met a number of kings and queens while playing at the asylum with Clayton. Luther was the only one who really looked the part—the noble bearing and the outsized face. You needed a big face to be a royal personage.

"I'm a prince," Luther said.

"Where's your princedom?" I said.

"Africa. You boys have any cigarettes?"

"We don't smoke. Aren't you kind of old to be a prince?"

That cracked Luther up. His laughing mouth was full of gold. "I was kidnapped to keep me from becoming king," he said. "That's why I'm still a prince." He paused. "I could die a prince and never be king. Unless I return to my people and reclaim my throne."

"What work crew they have you on?" Clayton asked.

The hospital had barns full of cows and pigs, large fields for growing the white cow corn they ate, fenced-in tracts of other vegetables. Farm work was part of the rehabilitation

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practiced there. Driving past the asylum in good weather, you saw crews of patients tending to the animals and plants.

Luther looked down at himself. "They took me to a patch of dirt and gave me a hoe," he said. "Me, a prince."

"And now you have to get back to your people," Clayton said.

"Yes. But first I need food and money. And cigarettes."

"Where are your people exactly?" I asked.

"I told you," Luther said. "Africa."

"Yeah, but what part?"

He didn't answer.

"Nigeria?" I suggested. Mr. Marsh had been trying to teach us something about Nigeria recently, though I couldn't remember what.

"Yes!" Luther said. "How did you know?"

"You look like people in pictures from there. Nice in Nigeria this time of year?"

"It is so beautiful," Luther said. "The sky is bright red every night, and all the people are singing. I must get back to my home. Soon, I must start out soon."

"Nigeria is ten thousand miles from here," Clayton said. "You're not gonna make it three miles to town. You're wearing chain-gang clothes, Luther."

"That's why I was hoping you boys could help me," he said.

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The administration building stood majestically at the head of the asylum's tree-lined central boulevard, with four columns of polished purple marble and a wide white staircase up to its elegant doors. It looked particularly grand from the grassy ridge we were standing on. Two Jersey state troopers had their cruisers parked in the circular drive around the fountain. They were out talking with hospital security cops and some men in suits.

"Look at this, Clayton," I said, squeezing his arm. "They're onto Luther."

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"How do you know that?"

"What else could it be? We can't go back there now. Luther's on his own."

"Those cops could be here for anything. They make the rounds. I live here, remember? Cops are here all the time."

"Not state troopers."

"It's a *state* hospital, man."

My father had told me that Jersey state troopers were the meanest people on earth, meaner than Marines. "I'm not messing around with them, Clayton."

"You are such a baby," he said.

We walked up the boulevard toward administration. At the base of an adjoining building, wide metal utility doors to the tunnels were standing open. Two black men in white uniforms were unloading a truck, stacking boxes of food on bright chrome carts for the kitchens. Clayton led me into the mouth of the tunnels, down the concrete ramp into the broad dim corridor beneath the ground. Naked bulbs burned in small cages on the ceiling. Their murky yellow light looked the way the tunnels smelled—a bitter smell of medicines and the fermentation of old age. Orderlies pushed patients strapped to tables along the concrete floors. People in wheelchairs rolled themselves from one building to another, nurses bustling past them in white leather shoes.

You could walk the asylum grounds all day and never imagine the tunnel-world that existed beneath you. When I played down there with Clayton, we ran around pretending to be in a dungeon or escaping from evil pursuers. We spied on the strangest people we could find, took stairways we'd never noticed before, surfaced inside buildings far from where we'd first gone in. Sooner or later we showed up in the basement kitchens to get food from Mrs. Parker. She was a nice lady with a formal, dignified way of speaking and carrying herself. She always seemed glad that Clayton was friends with me. Today she was at a big stainless-steel table, making baloney-and-cheese sandwiches on mushy white bread. Clayton and I stood silently beseeching her while she hummed a tune and

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layered meat and cheese on many slices of bread. I tried to think of a way to let her know what we were doing.

"We're starving, Mom," Clayton said. "Can we have two sandwiches each today?"

"How are you ever going to lose any weight, Clayton?" Mrs. Parker said. "You eat all the time and you don't get any exercise. You don't go out for a single sport."

"I'm going out for football next year," Clayton said.

Mrs. Parker raised her face to laugh. "Do you think I believe that nonsense?" She looked at me. "Gabriel, are you ill? You don't look well today."

"I'm not very hungry all of a sudden, Mrs. Parker."

Clayton glared at me. "He just told me he was starved!"

"Does Clayton eat the food I give you?" Mrs. Parker asked.

"No, ma'am. I eat it. I'm usually hungry."

"Maybe you let yourself get *too* hungry this time," she said. "That can happen. Eat your lunch and see if you don't feel better." She completed our sandwiches with mustard and lettuce leaves, and turned them over to us in waxed paper bags.

I looked back at her longingly as Clayton dragged me away. We left the kitchens and ran through the tunnels till we were under the building where the chambermaids had their headquarters. Clayton knew all the women who cleaned at the asylum; they lived in the workers' barracks too. Two maids, Margaret and Shirley, were on the sofa in the lunch room when we ran in.

"We putting on a play in school!" Clayton told them. "Can we get some of those old clothes you have? For costumes?"

"You never acted in any play, Clayton," Margaret said, her dark, white-stockinged legs crossed on the sofa, cigarette smoke coming out of her nose. "Besides, we don't have no clothes to fit you."

"No, it's older kids acting in it," he said.

"What kind of play?" she asked me.

"It's kind of about the Roaring Twenties," I said.

"I like that," said Shirley. "What characters you looking for?"

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"Men," I said.

"I know that! What *kind* of men?"

"A tycoon and a politician," said Clayton.

Margaret and Shirley seemed dazzled by the idea of characters like that. We followed them to big canvas hampers full of patients' unclaimed clothes. They pawed through the bins until a musty miasma filled the small back room we were in. When they were finished we had two whole outfits, a winter one and a summer one—jackets, pants, shirts and socks, two old-fashioned pairs of shoes. There was even a hat, a brown fedora hat. The women put it all into a paper shopping bag.

"Hey, when is this play?" Margaret called as we ran away down the stairs.

"Don't know yet!" Clayton called back. "We'll get you tickets!"

"You better, Clayton Parker!" she cried.

We went back underground and resurfaced at the hospital store. The goods in this store were subsidized by the mysterious entity of the state. You could get cakes and candy for a penny, soda for a nickel, whole packs of cigarettes for a dime. I always bought treats there for Clayton and myself. This time he wanted to do the buying and asked for money before we went in. He got soda and corn chips and candy bars and brought them to the counter. "Two packs of Luckies for my pop," he said to the clerk.

At the phone booth outside, he dropped in one of my dimes and dialed my number. Clayton knew that my mother made a regular Saturday trip to town, and with this knowledge he had conceived a plan. I tried to tell him it was crazy, that it wouldn't work, but he wouldn't listen, and so I got on the phone with my mother and asked her to stop and pick us up on her way.

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Luther poked his head out from behind a tree as we crunched into his hiding place in the woods. When he was sure we were

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alone he scrambled out. "Look what my mates have brought me!" he said when he saw the shopping bag slapping Clayton's leg. "Good work, my young princes!" He sat on the fallen trunk of a tree and wolfed a baloney sandwich while Clayton told him the plan.

Fear was closing off my throat so that I could hardly breathe. I kept looking at my watch. "She'll be here in less than half an hour," I said.

"What about money?" Luther said.

"He has money," Clayton said.

I had fifteen dollars left in my wallet, saved from my allowance over the winter. I said I had ten, and that much I turned over to Luther.

"Good boy," he said.

"I want something in return for that."

He dragged heavily on a cigarette. "What?"

"I want to know if you're crazy. If you're really insane."

He blew smoke at the asylum. "They say I am."

"What do *you* say?"

"I think they're right."

"Was your father crazy?"

"Yup."

"How about his father?"

"Same."

"See?" Clayton said.

"That's what you wanted to know?" said Luther.

"Not really," I said.

I stood by the side of the road above the cinder pit and watched for my mother. Her blue station wagon appeared in the distance. I thought of the many times I'd ridden that stretch of road in that very car. This was how the patients saw me coming, I thought, and for a strange moment I felt like a patient myself. My mother pulled onto the shoulder beside me. "You've been in that pit again," she said, but kindly because she loved me no matter what I did.

A pathetically false smile possessed my face. "Mom, could Clayton's uncle catch a ride to town too?"

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"Clayton's uncle?" she said. "Doesn't he have a car of his own?"

I wasn't prepared for this question. If a man wants a ride to town, doesn't that imply he has no car? I stood there stupidly, certain she knew I was up to something, until she looked behind me and smiled.

"Hello, Clayton," she said.

"Hi, Mrs. V.," he said. "My uncle has a car, but it's not here. He lives in Philadelphia. He's been visiting us. We would've called a cab to the train, but Gabriel said you were coming this way anyway."

"It's fine, Clayton," my mother said. "Where is he?"

Clayton affected great embarrassment, flapping his arms and covering his eyes. "Let me check on him," he said, and ran down the overgrown slope beside the cinder-cliff.

"I guess he stepped into the woods," I said.

"What for?" my mother asked.

I looked up at the sky. "I guess to go to the bathroom, Mom."

She lowered her eyes at the dashboard. "Oh, I see," she said.

In a few minutes, Clayton and Luther clambered up the embankment. Luther was wearing the heavy brown tweed suit. It was the hottest day of the spring so far, probably eighty degrees. I couldn't imagine why Luther had chosen the winter clothes. Then I remembered: he was crazy. He carried the paper shopping bag and held himself elegantly erect.

"Mrs. V.," said Clayton, "this is my Uncle Luther."

"Pleased to meet you, Luther," my mother said.

"Ma'am," said Luther, taking off the brown fedora and bowing from the waist beside her driver's window.

Something I hadn't realized about Luther in the open air became intensely clear when we were all in the car. He smelled bad. He smelled, in fact, like an asylum patient, and there was no mistaking or ignoring it. My mother looked over at me in the passenger seat. I never saw her smile more insincerely. She rolled her driver's window down. "Let me know

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if that's too much air for you, Luther," she said, pulling out onto the road.

"I like air," Luther said.

"And no wonder," my mother said. "You're overdressed for this weather."

I poked her thigh as if to say, *Jesus, Mom, they're poor. Those are probably the only nice clothes he has.* I saw her catch my meaning.

"Did you enjoy your visit?" she said.

"Yes'm," Luther said. "Didn't expect to stay quite as long as I did."

"Family visits can just go on and on, can't they?" my mother laughed.

"Yes'm, they sure can."

We drove past the well-kept older homes on the shady road between the asylum and town. I wondered what Clayton and Luther thought when they saw places like that. The town was a village, really, and just as it began there were two big stone churches, Lutheran and Episcopalian, one on either side of the road. They were churches from an earlier time, cathedrals compared to the modern Catholic one my family attended, a depressing brick rectangle next to a filling station.

Luther ogled the Episcopalian church, pressing his forehead against the car window and gaping at the ivy-covered stone and the mythic figures portrayed in stained glass. His nostrils flared, and his lips parted in a demented grin. I braced myself to hear him claim to be Jesus or one of those colorful saints, but he didn't say anything.

The train station was at the beginning of town, before the stores began. The maroon-and-silver train was sitting there. My mother pulled in and the three of us got out. "Thanks for the ride, Mrs. V.," Clayton called to my mother in the car. "See you, Gabe," he said to me and winked.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Where are you going?"

"To Philadelphia with my Uncle Luther."

"What are you talking about, Clayton?" I whispered.

"You knew I was going," he said loudly, so my mother could hear. "I told you that."

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"No, you did not tell me that."

Luther doffed his hat for my mother again and backed away. I started to follow after them.

"Gabriel, come on," my mother said. "You can say goodbye to Clayton here. How long are you going for, Clayton?"

"Two or three days," he said.

"You can survive without Clayton for a couple of days," my mother said to me, and I got back into the car.

For a half-hour I trailed behind her through the stores. I didn't want candy or comic books or any of the things I'd always wanted in town before. When we drove home, I controlled myself all the way to the asylum, certain I would see Clayton walking by himself on the side of the road. But I didn't. On the ride up our mountain, I broke down and told my mother what Clayton and I had done. She didn't believe it. She called Mrs. Parker, who didn't believe it, either. I was sent up to my room while she called my father at work. I looked out my window, but I couldn't see the asylum buildings below us or New York City on the horizon; the trees were already green enough to screen that all out. I gathered that my father was going to call the police, and that Luther and Clayton would have a reception when they arrived in Philadelphia. When my father got home, the unintelligible gravity of his low voice resonated through the house exactly as I imagined the voice of a Jersey state trooper—a terrifying sound bereft of human animation or joy.

He called me downstairs and made me go through it again. He didn't hit me; my mother didn't allow hitting in our house. But he didn't have to hit; when I was finished, he turned his back on me and walked away.

•

The next day was Sunday, and my father told me to dress up and get in the car. I'd made my confirmation the previous fall, and now that I was a man it was supposed to be my decision whether to continue worshipping or not. I had decided against

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it and hadn't been in the church since confirmation day. I would have to begin my confession with this information and then go on to my secular sins. I rode down the mountain nearly faint with dread. But instead of taking me to town, my father pulled into the asylum grounds, drove to the workers' barracks and parked. I didn't know he even knew where the workers' barracks were. I thought the asylum part of my life was separate from him. He was bringing me to apologize to Clayton's mother and father.

"But the whole thing was Clayton's idea," I said.

"Get in there," he said.

Mrs. Parker answered the door when I knocked. She was wearing a fancy dress and stockings and shoes. She motioned for me to step inside. Mr. Parker stood in their little living room in a suit and tie; he looked at me, but his face was utterly blank. The four girls sat on the sofa in dresses, with bows in their hair. I didn't understand what was going on. Then I realized that they'd been to church themselves, or were about to go. I'd never seen Mr. and Mrs. Parker dressed as anything but a cook and a groundskeeper, and seeing them now in their Sunday clothes staggered me. I started to cry. When I stopped, Mrs. Parker told me that she and Mr. Parker had had to plead for their very jobs after what Clayton and I had done.

"I'm really sorry, Mister and Missus Parker. I apologize," I said, sniffling and backing away, but Mrs. Parker took hold of my arm. Clayton had asked to see me, she said. "He knew I was coming?" I asked.

"Your father called us," she said and led me to Clayton's bedroom door.

He lay on the bed in his tiny, dim room, the only one of us not wearing Sunday clothes. His lips were cut, and his cheeks were swollen. His blackened eyes were puffy slits.

"Well, look who's here," he said. His rubbery words were hard to understand. "Nice, huh?" he added, indicating his face.

I couldn't think of anything to say.

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"So you had to go tell on me," Clayton said into the silence. "You had to turn me in."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I got scared something would happen to you."

"So you made sure something did."

"No, I didn't. I didn't make sure of anything. I was worried, that's all."

"You're always worried about something," he said. "You are such a mama's boy." He sat halfway up on his bed. "What were you worried about this time, Gabe? That I was gonna ride the train for a few hours and then go home? Big deal. You never rode a train before?"

The question tripped me up. In fact, I had never been on a train. "My parents always had cars," I said.

Clayton flopped back down on his bed and laughed.

"What's so funny about that?"

He giggled until I thought he was crying. "I don't know," he said between spasms. "It's just so funny. Your parents always had cars."

"I can't do anything about the way my family lives," I said. He didn't answer me. I took a step or two farther into his room. "Hey, Clayton."

"Yeah."

"What happened on the train, anyway?"

He turned his head to look at me. "Luther started acting crazy."

"Like what?"

"We made a big impression on him with Piltdown Man, Gabe. He couldn't get that out of his mind. He started doing it on the train."

I came a little closer to him. "Really!" I whispered. "Piltdown Man? That must have been a riot!"

"No, Gabe, it wasn't a riot."

"Oh," I said, looking at the floor. Then I saw what must have happened, almost as though I'd been there myself. "He scared some people?"

"Yeah, he did."

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"He was going up and down the aisle all hunched over, with his arms hanging out of his jacket, right? Leaning over people on the train and being a Piltdown and grunting and groaning and everything."

"That's right."

"And then I bet the conductors came."

"Yup."

"Hey, if the conductors came, they could have figured out who Luther was on their own. Maybe I had nothing to do with it at all."

"Oh, no, you had something to do with it, Gabe. Cops were waiting for us when we got to Philadelphia."

"But the conductors could have called the cops themselves. They get bulletins on their radios, and the hospital cops knew Luther was gone."

"What do you know about conductors?" Clayton said. "You weren't there. You've never even been on a train."

"But you might have gotten caught because Luther acted like Piltdown Man. I might not have caused you to get caught at all."

"No, Gabe, you caused it," Clayton stated in a firm, considered voice. "You turned me in," he said, and then he stopped speaking, and neither of us said anything for a minute or more.

"Hey, Clayton, listen," I finally said. "When this all blows over, we can go to the pit, and you can push me off the high part. You can push me off as many times as you want."

"I don't think so, Gabe," Clayton answered, without looking at me. "I don't think we'll be going there anymore," he said, and we never did.

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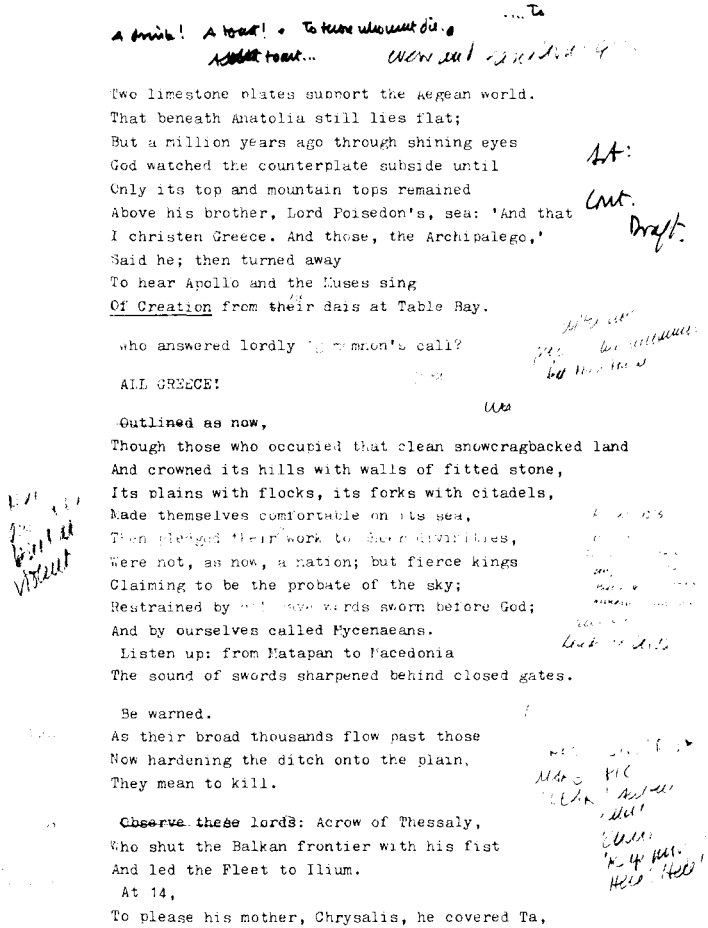

Two limestone plates support the Aegean world.
That beneath Anatolia still lies flat;
But a million years ago through shining eyes
God watched the counterplate subside until
Only its top and mountain tops remained
Above his brother, Lord Poisedon's, sea: 'And that
I christen Greece. And those, the Archipalego,'
Said he; then turned away
To hear Apollo and the Muses sing
Of Creation from their dais at Table Bay.

Who answered lordly [illegible]'s call?

ALL GREECE!

~~Outlined as now,~~
Though those who occupied that clean snowcragbacked land
And crowned its hills with walls of fitted stone,
Its plains with flocks, its forks with citadels,
Made themselves comfortable on its sea,
Then pledged their work to [illegible],
Were not, as now, a nation; but fierce kings
Claiming to be the probate of the sky;
Restrained by [illegible] words sworn before God;
And by ourselves called Mycenaeans.
Listen up: from Matapan to Macedonia
The sound of swords sharpened behind closed gates.

Be warned.
As their broad thousands flow past those
Now hardening the ditch onto the plain,
They mean to kill.

~~Observe these~~ lords: Acrow of Thessaly,
Who shut the Balkan frontier with his fist
And led the Fleet to Ilium.
At 14,
To please his mother, Chrysalis, he covered Ta,

A manuscript page from Christopher Logue's account of the Iliad.

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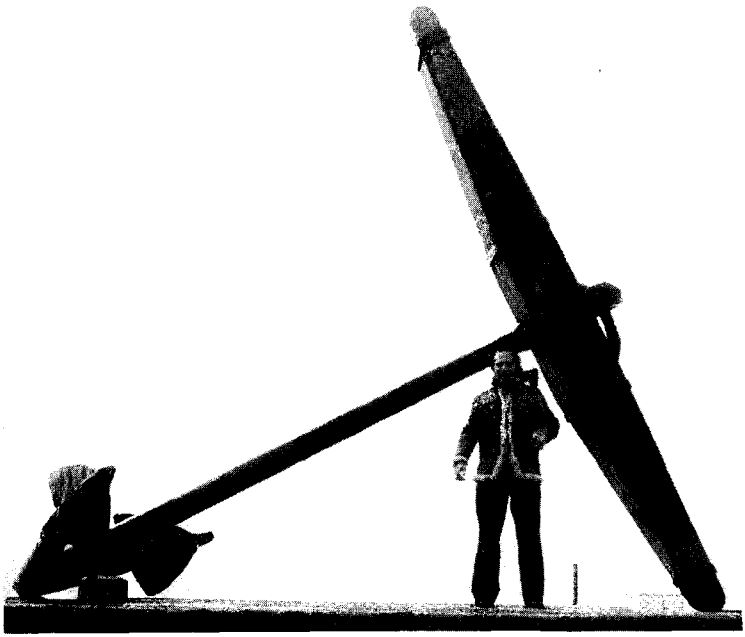

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Christopher Logue

The Art of Poetry LXVI

War Music, *Christopher Logue's adaptation of books 16 to 19 of Homer's* Iliad, *was published in 1987 and immediately hailed as a masterpiece on both sides of the Atlantic. It was the culmination of a long, sustained effort which produced* Patrocleia *(book 16) and* Pax *(book 19) in 1962 and 1969 respectively. For the past three years he has been working on books 1 to 4, the first two of which were published last year by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in a single volume under the title* Kings.

Logue's account of the Iliad *has been described as one of the major achievements of postwar English poetry, the most*

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important translation since Ezra Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius." George Steiner has called it "a work of genius . . . the most magnificent act of translation going on in the English language at the moment," while Louis MacNeice praised it as "not a translation but a remarkable achievement of empathy," and Henry Miller exclaimed, "I'm crazy about it. Haven't seen such poetry in ages."

Christopher Logue was born in 1926 in Portsmouth, England and was educated at Prior Park College, Bath and Portsmouth Grammar School. At seventeen he volunteered for the Army, and in 1946 he was sent to Palestine where he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for the illegal possession of government property. On his release in 1948 he returned to England and lived with his parents on public assistance before moving to Paris in 1951.

His first book of poems, Wand and Quadrant, *was published in 1953 by Collection Merlin in Paris. Three years later A.A.M. Stols of the Hague published* Devil, Maggot and Son. *He moved back to London in 1958, and in the years that followed he went on to produce poetry, translations of Villon and Neruda, plays, film scripts, songs and sketches. He has been a contributor to the satirical magazine* Private Eye *since 1960 and has published two collections from his column "True Stories" in books of the same title.*

He lives with his journalist wife, Rosemary Hill, in Camberwell Grove, South London and works in a quiet office at the top of the house. It overlooks on the street side one of the finest rows of Georgian houses in London and on the garden side the church of St. Giles, whose elegant spire rises over the trees and the low garden wall. He speaks in a deep, distinctive voice with a clear, melodious diction.

INTERVIEWER

A critic once remarked that your *Iliad* is the work of your genius, while your own poetry is the product of your talent. Let's start with the latter. When did you become aware of your talent for poetry? What triggered it?

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CHRISTOPHER LOGUE

My elocution mistress, Miss Crowe. As a child I had a deep voice. People would comment. My mother wanted me to be a priest or an actor, but, seeing that there wasn't much chance of the priesthood, she plumped for acting and sent me for elocution lessons. Miss Crowe was an attractive woman. I used to sit on the floor and look up her skirt—and that's how I became a poet. She taught me how to scan, and introduced me to many good poets: Browning, Tennyson, Bridges, Kipling. My next contact with poetry was when I went to Priory Park, a Catholic boarding school located in a beautiful Palladian house built by Ralph Allen, a friend of Alexander Pope. On its grounds was a grotto built by Allen for Pope. I used to go and play there, although it was by then a dank, derelict place. I had no idea who Pope was.

INTERVIEWER

How about English? Were you good at it?

LOGUE

Yes. We did Shakespeare's *Henry V*, and I loved it. I memorized chunks of it. People often say that their school put them off Shakespeare for life. That is nonsense. They had no taste for it and are ashamed of that, so they blame the school, the teacher, or the poet.

INTERVIEWER

What made you decide to go into the army instead of art school, or university?

LOGUE

It was 1944. I was seventeen and a half and I couldn't see my way forward. I had no idea what to do with myself. I was always in trouble. I was a trouble to myself. I thought maybe I'll be killed, that's the best thing for me.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of trouble did you get into?

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LOGUE

Stealing. Money from my mother's purse, or my father's pockets, things from shops—semi-pornographic magazines, expensive toys, and sweets—and then I would be caught and punished. Once I was taken to a juvenile court. When the time came for me to appear, my father came with me with his retirement certificate—he was a civil servant, working in the post office for forty-five years—wrapped in brown paper under his arm. He unwrapped it and showed it to the magistrates. I felt incredibly proud of him, and terribly ashamed of myself. Thereafter I stopped stealing . . . except lines of poetry.

Anyway, the army took me in because there was a war, and I was a volunteer. By the time I had finished my training, the war in Germany was over and my unit was sent to Palestine. We, the British, were trying to stop large-scale Jewish emigration into Palestine—this was 1946. I was there for three months before I went to jail.

INTERVIEWER

How did that happen?

LOGUE

How is easy to tell, *why* is hard to know. I think now that I contrived a way of getting the army to punish me. It was an act of spiteful masochism. I had by chance, but illegally, obtained six army paybooks, which were also identity documents. I announced to everyone in my tent that I planned to sell them to the Jews. I knew no Jews. I hardly knew what the word *Jew* meant. But I identified with those my side was against. I imagined myself as a Jew. It was provocative. You must remember that at this time (1946) British soldiers were being shot by Israeli terrorists who might have used army paybooks to gain access to a camp. I took the paybooks with me into Haifa, but no sooner had I reached the town than one of the men to whom I had announced my plan arrived with an officer and arrested me. I pleaded guilty to the charges

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and I said: "If I had had guns I would have sold them too." They gave me two years, with eight months remission, and I served sixteen months.

INTERVIEWER

Where was the prison? What was it like being a prisoner?

LOGUE

It was Acre, now Akko, a Turkish fort built on the site of a castle taken by Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade. I was put in with the Jewish prisoners because they were "white"—which meant European—under what was called "Special Treatment," which was lucky for me, because the Palestinians were very badly treated, not physically, but like second-rate people, heaped up in crowded cells.

The governor of the prison was also the hangman, and when Jewish terrorists were to be hanged, he would hang them, and then come and inspect us. The condemned cell was close to our tower; we knew what was going on. Ours was one of four towers around the courtyard. I was in a tiny cell of my own with a view of the sea. I had books.

INTERVIEWER

Just the place for a budding poet. Did you have many books?

LOGUE

I used the prison library. I read continually but unsystematically. While under arrest before my trial, one of my fellow soldiers gave me the American edition of Auden's *Collected Poems*. As well, I had a complete Shakespeare and the collected works of Oscar Wilde.

INTERVIEWER

You once said you didn't care for Auden.

LOGUE

Nothing disrespectful. Basically, he did not have a great influence on me. I didn't really find my mark until I read

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Eliot. Then I thought, bloody *great*! That's the stuff for me! And then I read Pound and I thought he was wonderful too. I have not changed my mind. Eliot is still the best for me and what happened after him is not as interesting, not as good. What Picasso did for painting, Eliot did for poetry in English. With new forms and fresh words he created a world within his work that represents very accurately the mood of the world we are still in. He sees the world, not a waste place, but a place in which it is difficult to live and to have hope. As this was true of the Greeks, it is true of us. But that is not what struck me then. What struck me then was the way he wrote. You read it, you clap your hands. His poetry thinks as it feels:

> Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
> I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
> I have heard mermaids singing, each to each.
>
> I do not think that they will sing to me.
>
> I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black.

Pound too, is a wonderful writer. He can teach you. His influence on me was very strong, particularly his "Homage to Sextus Propertius." But intellectually, formally, Eliot is a much greater influence.

INTERVIEWER

What about Yeats? His influence was quite noticeable in a poem you wrote deploring his lofty detachment from politics; a critic commented that while attacking Yeats you managed to be Yeatsian. Is it the Irish in you?

LOGUE

My paternal grandfather was Irish. The idea that the Irish make good poets is rubbish. Who was there between Swift and Yeats, Arthur O'Shaughnessy? A. E. [George Russell]?

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After Yeats, Kavanagh. There is no Irish MacDiarmid or Garioch. The Irish excel at drama: Congreve, Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, O'Casey, Synge, Beckett. No one can match that. I read Yeats as much as Eliot and Pound but I do not think he struck me so deeply. Still, some of his poems explode in your head like dynamite.

INTERVIEWER

His love poetry?

LOGUE

No, I don't think his love poetry is exceptional. A poem like "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz" draws a marvelous picture:

The light of evening, Lissadell,
Great windows open to the south,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.

The fact that he was in love with one of the girls is irrelevant. For love poetry you read Donne, Shakespeare, the Caroline lyricists or "In Memoriam." Yeats's best poems are about what happens to people when there is a war, or about his dreams, or about him growing old.

INTERVIEWER

You mean things like "Sailing to Byzantium?"

LOGUE

Marvelous stuff, based on a rubbishy theory. Shaw is champion on Yeats: Florence Farr once persuaded him to go to a reading of hers and Yeats's. The letter he wrote to her afterwards is hilarious: Do not come on dressed in a toga. Do not carry a harp and strum it during the reading. Do not burn incense. Do not intone.

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INTERVIEWER

When did you write your first poem?

LOGUE

I can't remember. Seventeen? Eighteen? But I'd told myself I was a poet for as long as I could remember. I thought that being a poet was what made people allow you to be irresponsible. You say you are a poet and you get away with murder! Eventually, I thought it was about time I wrote a poem. One's background has a major effect. I'm English. For some reason the English are good at writing poetry. If I'd been French, I might well have become a painter. So, you look around and say: "What is it my lot can do?" Of course, you are not conscious of looking around, but there are examples under your nose, prestige attaches to them and you learn from them. You want to do as well. Yeats says:

> Nor is there singing school but studying
> Monuments of its own magnificence

That is true. There is no other way.

INTERVIEWER

What did you do after you left the Army?

LOGUE

I went on public assistance. I was determined not to get a job. I had a job—I was a poet. I had a notebook into which I used to copy the poems I liked. For my twenty-first birthday my father gave me twenty-one one-pound notes, a lot of money for him and my mother; they had saved it over the years. I bought a typewriter. I would type poems that I liked and learn them by heart. Then in 1951 I went to Paris, fell in love with a Brazilian girl, and started writing poems about the experience. They are not good love poems. They are about somebody who is in love, not about two people. But that is how I began.

Matthew Arnold, a marvelous poet, much neglected, writes

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extraordinary poems about love; but they are not love poems, they are about him being in love and having a terrible time:

I must not say that she was true,
Yet let me say that she was fair;
And they, that lovely face who view,
They should not ask if truth be there.

Truth—what is truth? Two bleeding hearts,
Wounded by men, by fortune tried,
Outwearied with their lonely parts,
Vow to beat henceforth side by side.

That, from his "Euphrosyne," is as good as anybody has done since.

INTERVIEWER

There was a lively Anglo-American literary scene in Paris. Were you attracted by that, or just following in the footsteps of Joyce, Pound, Hemingway and others?

LOGUE

Partly because of the writers you mention and partly because I knew that Paris was beautiful and had lots of good painting.

INTERVIEWER

You started writing poems once you were in Paris. How did you get them published?

LOGUE

Wand & Quadrant, my first book, came out in Collection Merlin, the book-publishing side of the literary magazine *Merlin*, which was edited by my friend, Alexander Trocchi. I printed a subscription form and asked people to buy a copy in advance for £1. An American girl, whose name I regret to say I have forgotten, gave me £50 towards the publication. I learned how much money publishers make: For the £150 the book cost to print we got 600 books. I had 50 subscribers

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which left me with 550 copies. These I sold in cafés or to passersby. I paid off the £50 debt and soon moved into profit.

INTERVIEWER

Is that how you earned your living?

LOGUE

I didn't earn a living, I "got by." A little teaching, some writing and so forth.

INTERVIEWER

The meeting place of the English-speaking expatriates on the Left Bank was the Café Tournon. George Plimpton and Bob Silvers went there, James Baldwin, William Gardiner Smith and Richard Wright among others. Was there a particular reason you chose the Tournon?

LOGUE

The Tournon was cheaper than the Flore and the Deux Magots in St. Germain-des-Pres. It was spacious and had a beautiful location, opposite the Luxembourg Gardens.

INTERVIEWER

Can you tell me about the *Merlin* crowd?

LOGUE

Dick Seaver, who shared the responsibility with Alex Trocchi and Austryn Wainhouse for getting the magazine out, was quick, tough, idealistic, serious. I didn't see it then, but he really meant to be what in fact he became, a distinguished publisher. Dick found Samuel Beckett for us; Alex charmed him. Austryn was the more academic and politically minded. His father had spent his life as a senior U.S. Government official, something in the Foreign Service, and this background taught Austryn to analyze the policies of governments and to predict, often accurately, what would happen in the world. "You have no idea, Christopher, what politicians are like,"

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Austryn told me. "As a boy I would be studying in my room, and down the landing my dad would be scrubbing John Foster Dulles's back as he sat in our tub. I'd stand outside and eavesdrop: 'Wainhouse,' the Secretary of State would say, 'What are we going to do with these goddamn Chinks?,' 'JFD,' my dad would reply—they had been at school together—'Don't act hastily.' 'Wainhouse, I have no goddamn intention of acting at all if I can help it. Scrub up and let's have some more hot water.'" When Austryn told me this I felt very cross with those two. Now I know better.

Austryn was, and is, very diligent. Translating de Sade, for example, he developed a sort of modern eighteenth-century prose. He was careful to read around the subject too and would talk at length about revolutionary France. He was—and is—extremely generous with his time and money, not that he has a lot, and what he has he has mostly worked for. There is something of the pioneer in him. Very American. He has built three houses, in France and the United States. He can do carpentry, masonry, wiring and plumbing. He will actually take such a task on. Also with *Merlin* was Patrick Bowles, a poet, short-story writer and Beckett's translator. He was easy-going, patient, with a funny sort of half-laugh, starting low in his throat, then rising, slowly, up and up, to burst out of his nose in a loud crack. He was a difficult person to get on the move. *Merlin* publisher Jane Lougee said of him, "Hello and good-bye is a good hour." Austryn once told me "I was going down St. Germain, and I saw Patrick talking to Iris [Iris Owens, the novelist] in the doorway of the apartment house next to the Deux Magots. Patrick was talking, Iris was listening. An hour later when I came back they were in exactly the same position, with Patrick talking and Iris listening, but now silent tears were falling down Iris's cheeks."

Iris was very beautiful and knew a lot about painting. I went to her hotel room once and suddenly she bent down and dragged a huge Cy Twombly out from under the bed. I was terribly impressed. Everyone fell in love with Iris. Bowles did, Maurice Gerodias of the Olympia Press did, Trocchi did,

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but I didn't. I lacked the courage. But I don't think it would have come to anything. She had very high standards.

One night Iris, Trocchi and a group of us went to the *Salle Pleyel* to hear Gerry Mulligan. Before we went we smoked a lot of marijuana and there we were in the best seats, in the balcony. The concert began. Wonderful. But towards the end of the first half, Iris jumped up and shouted out at the top of her voice—and she was a big girl—"He is crucified! He is crucified!" Everybody looked at us. "*Tais-toi'. Sale étrangère.*" What could we do? "He is crucified!" Iris went on. This was the kind of situation in which Alex was good. "*Mes amis*," he said to the neighboring seats, "this is Miss Owens, the world-famous jazz critic." Iris knew nothing whatever about jazz. "Iris has been in love with the great Gerry for many years and he has just been savaged by an ignorant English critic." With this we left.

It was Trocchi who arranged for me to read to Natalie Barney for £4 an hour. She was one of the first American women publicly to declare herself a homosexual, which she did around 1926. She was very rich and lived in a house on the Rue Jacob. The street door opened onto a little courtyard on the far side of which was the entrance, surrounded by wall flowers and vines. A maid let me in. The first room was very large and the blinds were drawn down. The maid showed me towards the French windows at the far end, and beyond them was a garden—a garden in the sixth arrondissement, all of your own!—with a statue of Pan and behind him a trellis overgrown with white roses.

Miss Barney was in a large chair with a footstool. She asked me if I was Logue. I said, "Yes ma'am." There was no doubt who was in charge. Miss Barney said that she had been told I read well and that I should read her some Pound.

I began to read from the *Cantos*. "With Usura . . ." Miss Barney told me to stop and asked why I pronounced Us*u*ra *U*sura. I wish I had had the courage to give Johnson's answer, "Pure ignorance madam," but I said nothing and she told me to start again. This time I did it properly and rather well; I

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knew it by heart anyway. When I had finished she asked me if I believed all that rubbish about money. I had just received my first letter from Pound. He was an idol. I said something like, "Not entirely ma'am," but in fact I did not believe that a world in which money was not lent at interest would necessarily be a good world, but at the same time I didn't want to let Ezra down.

Miss Barney understood my predicament and said that it was beautiful rubbish anyway and that Ezra had believed every word of it and that he was a completely honest fool.

She spoke with the same kind of accent as Austryn and George Plimpton. Before we parted she said something like, "I hope that you are completely indifferent to politics. All politicians are liars with blood on their hands and they think about nothing else except other politicians, just like poets think about nothing except poets." As I went out the maid gave me my money. All told I went about half a dozen times. Sometimes Miss Barney would go to sleep soon after I started to read. Once she invited me to her famous salon and the rooms were jam packed with sixty- to seventy-year-olds, all incredibly famous. But there were lots of delicious sandwiches and cakes; so I filled up and went away.

INTERVIEWER

And *The Paris Review* crowd?

LOGUE

I got on well with George Plimpton from the start. I remember him saying that I wasn't to be surprised if people crossed the road when we walked along together because he bore a strong resemblance to Alger Hiss. George wore hats and had lots of style and was not a bit upset by the *Merlin* crowd's opinion that *The Paris Review* was a bit lightweight. He was very romantic. He fell in love with a girl who wasn't having any part of him. George decided on a heroic gesture. Her hotel room had a balcony with French windows. George decided to ride a bicycle through the windows into the bedroom wearing a wicker bull's head he had brought back from Spain.

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My job was to hand up the bicycle when George had climbed onto the balcony. As I am not very strong the brake cables got caught around the iron urns on the balcony; then one of the pedals got wedged between the bottom rail and the balcony floor. When George, with a mighty heave, pulled the bicycle over the rail, the bell—one of those new battery-powered types—began to ring. He couldn't turn it off. The girl came out, looking very nice in yellow and black pajamas, and I slunk away.

INTERVIEWER

Bob Silvers and Peter Matthiessen were among the other founders of *The Paris Review*. How did you get on with them?

LOGUE

Bob Silvers was very agreeable and shy. Nobody guessed that he would become the most influential literary editor [*The New York Review of Books*] in the West. Matthiessen was glum but kind. I recall him sitting on the terrace of the Tournon while reading some verse of mine and buying me a drink. He offered me the postage money and the addresses of various U.S. magazines I was to send the poems to. I asked him if he thought they'd take them. He said no, but give it a shot. Much to my surprise a paperback-styled magazine called *New Writing* did take one of them, but in the issue that followed the editor apologized to his readers for my not being an American citizen.

INTERVIEWER

How did you meet Samuel Beckett?

LOGUE

Beckett let Dick Seaver have the manuscript of *Watt*. Word spread that it was a work of genius and incredibly funny. One evening we all went to Dick's room and we passed the manuscript around and read bits out loud and it *was* incredibly funny. Dick and Alex decided to publish it in *Merlin* and

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anything Beckett would give us. He was tall and very good looking. He wore a windcheater with a huge fur collar and looked like an eighteenth-century intellectual aristocrat. He was a rare phenomenon—a writer who was also quite saintly. He was extremely generous, always giving money away to everyone in need, including me. He had natural integrity and was not a bit vain in the worldly sense of the word, though he was very proud of his writing.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about your translation work, especially your Homer, which has been your main concern for the past decade or so and which some people consider best expresses your poetic gifts. I remember your translation of Villon's "La Ballade des dames du temps jadis," which was published as a poster in the sixties and sold thousands of copies. And before that you had done Neruda's love poems. Then came the *Iliad*. Yet one can't call them translations—to start with you don't know the original languages. Is it what the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets called *imitation*?

LOGUE

This is a difficult question. Imitation in Dryden's sense of the word meant an English version of a poem in Latin aimed at people who knew Latin—a sort of cover version. I use existing translations and commentaries and essays to tell me what's going on; after that I'm on my own. That is why, when talking about *War Music* or *Kings* to myself, I call them my "Homer poems." But in public I call them "an account," a word I chose because it has a neutral, police-file air to it.

INTERVIEWER

Which of the existing translations of the *Iliad* have inspired you most?

LOGUE

It is the idea of the poem that has inspired me. I always read Chapman and Pope, just to see what as poets they did.

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Pope was the last poet to translate the *Iliad* into English verse. I look at new translations as they come out, that of Professors Knox and Fagels, for example, which is a touch sharper than Professor Lattimore's. However, these three professors may have been reading Homer all their lives, but he's failed to teach them what verse is. They do not write verse. They write blank-verse prose, sired by E.V. Rieu, via Lang, Leaf and Myers out of the King James Bible. It burbles along but it doesn't scan. Still, such things make a bomb for the publishers. Those who aspire to poetical know-how usually buy Lattimore or a Rieu-type Homer. I have never seen any evidence that any of them get past the introductions. But the professors love it. They are the translation police. It is easy to see why: it keeps Homer in their hands. If they had to teach Homer via Chapman or Pope or even Logue, they would have to *teach* Chapman and Pope and Logue. And that is, quite frankly, just asking too much. Heterodidacts are like that. Critically-minded scholars, such as Jasper Griffin, M. S. Silk, Charles Beye, W. A. Camps and Malcolm Willcock tell me much more than such translators.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you pick Homer?

LOGUE

I didn't. Donald Carne-Ross picked me for Homer. I was one of the number of poets he commissioned to make a version of the *Iliad* for the BBC in 1959. After that, Kathleen Raine and Stephen Spender got me a Bollingen Foundation grant and I wrote *Patrocleia*, which later became part of *War Music*.

INTERVIEWER

You have told me that you wanted to create scenes and confrontations that are not in the *Iliad*. What were you thinking of doing, and is it legitimate?

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LOGUE

Raising questions of authenticity means that we must turn into amateur philosophers and be here until the cows come home. I respect translators. I have no doubt that many texts can be accurately and beautifully translated; but certain texts, like poetry and some kinds of prose, have special problems. Solving those problems is not my business.

I want to write a dramatic poem in English that is dependent on the *Iliad*, and yet that will revitalize narrative verse. As I said, I have learned what I think the *Iliad* is from translations and essays by scholars, historians, anthropologists and archaeologists. I aim to make my Homer poem true to *my* idea of the *Iliad*. To this end I have written new scenes and introduced some new characters; I review some of Homer's characters to get at what is there and to make explicit the thoughts present in Homer's work. To make the work readable. This means the expansion of some scenes and the removal of others.

When all is said and done my Homer poem remains easily identifiable as a work dependent on the *Iliad*. There is no deception. How can there be? As Vergil said, it is easier to rob Hercules of his club than Homer of a single line. But I think I know how to make the *Iliad*'s voices come alive and how to keep the action on the move. It is a legitimate hope, though it may be in vain. To cheer myself up, I associate my work with parts of Chaucer's, all of Tyndale's—hoping to avoid his fate†—and with some of Jonson's, Pope's, Dr. Johnson's, Fitzgerald's, Pound's, Waley's and Garioch's. With the exception of Tyndale, all these chaps composed poems in English dependent on poems in other languages. Sometimes they knew those languages, sometimes not.

INTERVIEWER

Why has it taken you so long?

† William Tyndale (?-1536) translated the Bible into vernacular English at a time when the possession of Bibles in the vernacular was a serious offense. He was denounced as a heretic by the Inquisition and strangled and burned at the stake in Antwerp.

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LOGUE

I haven't worked at it consistently. Several years would pass between my efforts. I was not committed. Seven years ago I married, and my wife is a more serious and much better educated person than I am. One day when I was glowing with self-pity (a subject Homer knows a great deal about) she pointed out that *Patrocleia* had been in print and had been given three radio and four stage productions in fifteen years, plus being issued on disc in Britain and the U.S.A. whereas most books of verse do not see a second edition. That this had been done without much critical support made the case stronger.

It was not until then that I saw the job under my nose. Not long after that she introduced me to Craig Raine, in 1985 I think, and since then I have worked at the poem five days a week for between three and four hours a day, after which I am done in. I am a pernickety writer. If I were a film director I would be a twenty-five-take man . . . driving the actors and the crew mad.

INTERVIEWER

How do you work on it?

LOGUE

After learning the content of the section in hand from my reading, I make an outline: narrative, main scenes, subsidiary scenes—camp, plain, Troy, characters, new characters. Then I start on the verse. But as any writer will tell you, things change as they go along. What at first looked important is shown to be redundant. But "work on it" in my case does not end with the manuscript. For me, until I have heard it read aloud, the published text is incomplete. I made a lot of changes to the text of *Kings* after hearing the BBC Radio performance. There is nothing like a reading, a good reading, to show where overwriting, "poetical" writing, or lack of clarity occurs. A good reading makes it obvious where you have failed to emphasize the right thing. We can ignore the question of writing

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"for the eye" or "for the ear." The alternative is false. Good poets write with both in mind, the emphasis will be slightly different, but not much. The maxim "Look after the sense and sounds will look after themselves" is wrong. You have to manage both.

Poetry is not a silent art. The poem must perform, unaided, in its reader's head. Educated readers give themselves a good performance. Educated listeners compare performance with text and with other performances. Good poets use the full resources of language.

One thing I learnt from writing verse at length is that you must study novelists. You have to keep your eye out for simple things like avoiding physical disparities, varying simple actions, using repetitions rather less lavishly than Homer does while aiming for a similar effect.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of advice do you get, about the *Iliad*, if any, from scholars?

LOGUE

Carne-Ross is a scholar, and because of him I am at work on the *Iliad*, as I mentioned before. There are some wonderful modern scholars. Jasper Griffin's book *Homer on Life and Death* is exceptionally good. Mark Edwards is sharp as a tack. So is Charles Beye. But these chaps know a lot about poetry as well as a lot about Greek. They are critics as well as scholars. Then there is Kirk who is leading a team of commentators. He is a brilliant analyst of Homer's speeches and has a really wonderful understanding of character. Of course there are a lot of noddies about. As Eliot says, it is better to be spurred to acquire scholarship because you enjoy the poetry than to suppose you enjoy the poetry because you have acquired the scholarship.

INTERVIEWER

Was it part of your original plan to use modern imagery in your Homer?

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LOGUE

Homer is full of anachronisms, so it seemed the natural thing to do. As far as the long similes are concerned, they also came about in what I can only call a natural way. I saw that Homer used them and so when the opportunity arose I used one too. That they were not Homer's similes seems irrelevant to me.

INTERVIEWER

What is your ultimate plan for the *Iliad*?

LOGUE

I have a clearish idea now about my work on my Homer poem as a whole. When he was my editor at Faber & Faber, Craig Raine commissioned me to cover Books 1 to 4. *Kings* covers 1 and 2. Now I'm in the middle of 3 and 4, which will have their own title.

As soon as I began *Kings* I realized that if I was going to continue the work I had begun I must have at least a solid, criticizable idea of what would follow. I have been able to make such a plan. But its completion depends to a quite large extent on whether or not I can find a way to finance it.

I know it sounds a bit pretentious to talk about financing a poem, yet in some ways it resembles a movie. I have a cast of fifty thousand: fifteen major characters, twenty-five subsidiary characters and two superheroes. And this excludes Helen, who is the most beautiful woman who has ever lived and a consideration all of her own. But I have received considerable support and have saved enough to finish books 3 and 4. Homer teaches you that it is a mistake to expect too much or to think too far ahead.

INTERVIEWER

Can you comment on the relationship between your Homer poem and the main currents of poetry today?

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LOGUE

There must be such a relationship, and it must be quite close. On the other hand, none of my contemporaries seem to be interested in the things that interest me, such as fast, clear, several-stranded narrative, action, character, violence. These things occur in a non-existent world, set in the middle of a non-existent event: a ten-year war fought over a woman.

Although I admire greatly some of its examples I am not close to the poetry of actual experience—Hardy, Kipling, Betjeman, Larkin. That "this" happened to this or that person does not make a strong appeal to me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you use a rhyming dictionary?

LOGUE

I use all kinds of reference books. You can tell when you are getting old because your reference books are all out of date. I could spend a year reading Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, which of course I do not own. They're really nutty those musicians. Somewhere in *Boswell's Life* Johnson recommends collecting one kind of book, regardless. I thought I would collect Anglo-American rhyming dictionaries. I got a dozen before boredom set in. Rhymes can be a nuisance. Some days they seem to pester you. You have to recast several lines just to get rid of them.

INTERVIEWER

Thesaurus?

LOGUE

Constantly. You have got to learn how to use it. Looking for the right word is the wrong way. The book rarely thinks for you. But it is very useful as a kick start; it can help you to change direction. Like other writers I have a card index of favorite words I would like to get in. *Philtrum*, the dimple in the upper lip, for example. I got it into *Kings*. I was very

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pleased with myself and pointed it out to my friend John Marquand. But he just grunted and changed the subject.

INTERVIEWER

Are you constantly an observer, on the look-out for what may turn into a poem?

LOGUE

More of an Autolycus (Odysseus's grandfather) really. Not on the lookout for a new poem, but for thoughts and phrases and images that seem likely to supply something I need for my Homer poem. Homer is full of noises. So, although I know it sounds a bit daft, I collect noises, the sound of steel keys hitting concrete perhaps, or a letter dropping into a half-filled post box. Lighting effects too. I found the opening sequence of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* quite useful . . . that dirty light he describes.

Another example: you notice how beautifully and economically Evelyn Waugh gets a character across the room and out of the door. You note it. You may use it. I have hundreds of such items. Most of them will never be used. But they are comforting.

INTERVIEWER

Is there an overriding credo that you have in mind when you write?

LOGUE

Only a literary credo [Logue takes out a notebook and reads.] "How many resolve that nothing shall leave the workshop which is not as perfectly finished as our talents allow? How many have simply given up the effort to plan and adorn a work of art?" That is Evelyn Waugh from an interview he gave to the Sunday *Times* in the early 1960s. I have published some bad stuff, but I hope I shall do no more of that.

So much of the poetry that is published and praised today seems to be the work of self-indulgent windbags, people who

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imagine that self-expression is a justification for writing. It is easier to become the president of the United States than a good poet. Any poet writing in English is expected to produce striking phrases, quotable lines, memorable passages and just plainly beautiful things. And this the minimum.

Regarding larger issues: Once I thought I understood the connections between morality and politics. I deceived myself. Thank heaven my political thoughts and words came to very little. I remain a lefty. I think that until we have worked out how to combine socialism and liberty we will never have a just world. My political position is dusty pink.

As anyone who knows me will tell you, I'm not fit for politics. I'm impatient and bossy. Apt to jump to conclusions of which I am subsequently ashamed. I really dislike power. A vote is all I am entitled to. I think I am patriotic, but in conversation with myself I always say, a universal patriotism or none. I know I have had a very lucky life.

Walking along the road the other day with my friend from the Paris days, Joshua Leslie, now a professor of mathematics at Howard University, we agreed that in the light of our cheek and our rudeness we are lucky to have survived.

INTERVIEWER

What is the state of poetry in England?

LOGUE

"Nobody starves." Well, that isn't quite true. Ted Hughes found Harry Fainlight's body lying outside a hovel in the Welsh hills surrounded by empty cans of baked beans. He had been dead for a week. He was partly eaten by rats. I don't know what happened. He was a wild lad, not really Macmillan Foundation material.

I expect good things from Craig Raine, Carol Ann Duffy, Christopher Reid, Fleur Adcock and Peter Reading. A chap called Simon Armitage looks as though he is going to be remembered.

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INTERVIEWER

Do many poets teach for a living?

LOGUE

Not as many as in America. Raine left Faber & Faber to teach at Oxford. Those who have him as their teacher are lucky.

I think the Irish have the best idea about supporting poets. Desmond O'Grady told me, "We were all at school with Charlie, (Charles Haughey) so when he became prime minister of Ireland (1979-1982), and we were having a drink in the Parliament bar, someone, it might have been me, said 'Why doesn't Charlie do something for all the poets?' Now Charlie is no fool. He knows that without a good poet's praise politicians are soon forgotten. The very next day he put £50 million of the Irish Government's money on deposit in a Swiss bank and the interest goes to the poets.'"

INTERVIEWER

It sounds as though you should invoke your Irish grandfather and claim to be Irish.

LOGUE

I'm not good looking enough!

INTERVIEWER

What is the difference between the literary worlds of London and Paris?

LOGUE

I suppose the nearest I have come to being part of a literary world was when we were together in Paris and we saw each other quite regularly and talked about books and ideas. I have never been part of the London literary scene. I know other writers but my time has been passed with painters, antique dealers, musicians, booksellers, journalists, actors and film people. I find it natural to collaborate with others on such

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things as posters, songs, films, shows. This is unusual in literary London. I like a worky atmosphere, and now that I have a long task to get on with, London is an excellent place to be.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say something on the difference between English and American poetry?

LOGUE

Sometimes I think that the variety present in the U.S. has made things difficult for its poets. In some ways American English is flat. It seems to me that the contrast between adjacent syllables has lessened and the result is an overreliance on enjambement. Now enjambement is a fine, intellectually strong aid, but like all such things it becomes tiresome and calls too much attention to itself. I was raised on modern U.S. poetry—Pound, Eliot, Williams. I cannot understand why it has gone flat. I find it irritating. August Kleinzahler is a favorite of mine, a child of William Carlos Williams, who writes subtle, witty poems, not flat at all. Perhaps it is me. Perhaps it has got something to do with being English, used to a set of clear contrasts. Mark you, we are thick with enjambement-only boys and girls. All no bloody good. All for the tip.

Though I must say Mr. John Ashbery is the Longfellow of his age, rather like our own Sir Richard Blackmore who, as Dryden said, composed book-length poems "to the rumbling of his coach's wheels."

O you dead poets who are living yet,
Immortal in your verse, tho' life be fled,
To place us ever further in your debt,
Restrain those living poets who are dead

INTERVIEWER

Is there a turf battle between English and American poetry, then?

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LOGUE

Not that I know of. It might be a good thing though. The Scots are famously underrated. The truth is that much of the finest poetry in English in the twentieth century has been written by Scotsmen in one or other of the dialects they cast English into. Muir, MacDiarmid, MacCaig, Goodsir, Smith, W. S. Graham, Douglas Dunn, and the younger people like Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Carol Ann Duffy. But they lack a U.S. wing—if you know what I mean.

INTERVIEWER

You are not writing any of your own poetry now. Has the *Iliad* dried up your poetic spring?

LOGUE

I don't think so. Let us finish with a short poem:

O come all ye faithful
Here is our cause:
All dreams are one dream,
All wars civil wars.
Lovers have never found

Agony strange;
We who hate change survive
Only through change
Those who are sure of love
Do not complain.
For sure of love is sure
Love comes again.

—**Shusha Guppy**

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Portfolio

Roberto Juarez

Studies for Days of the Year

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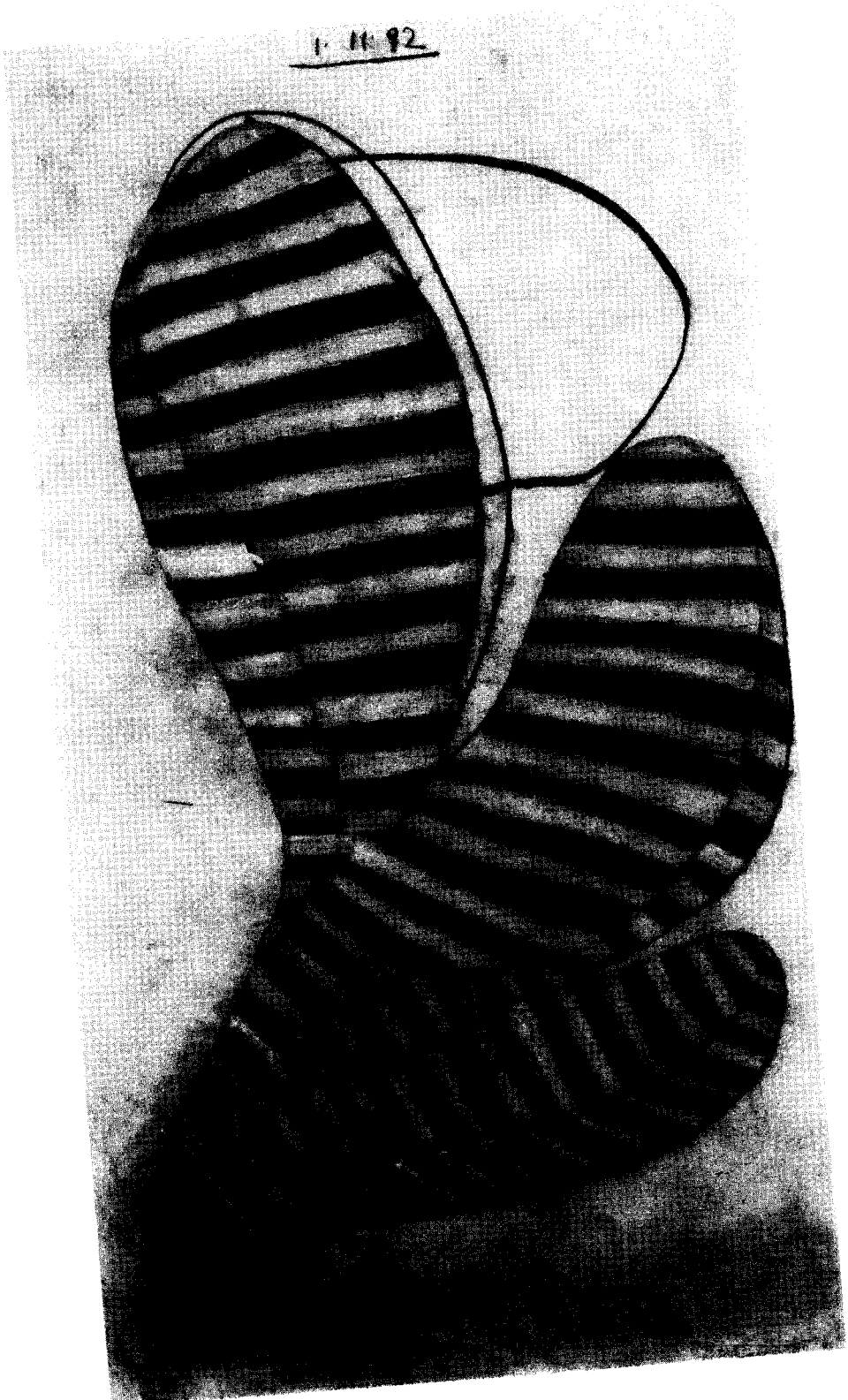

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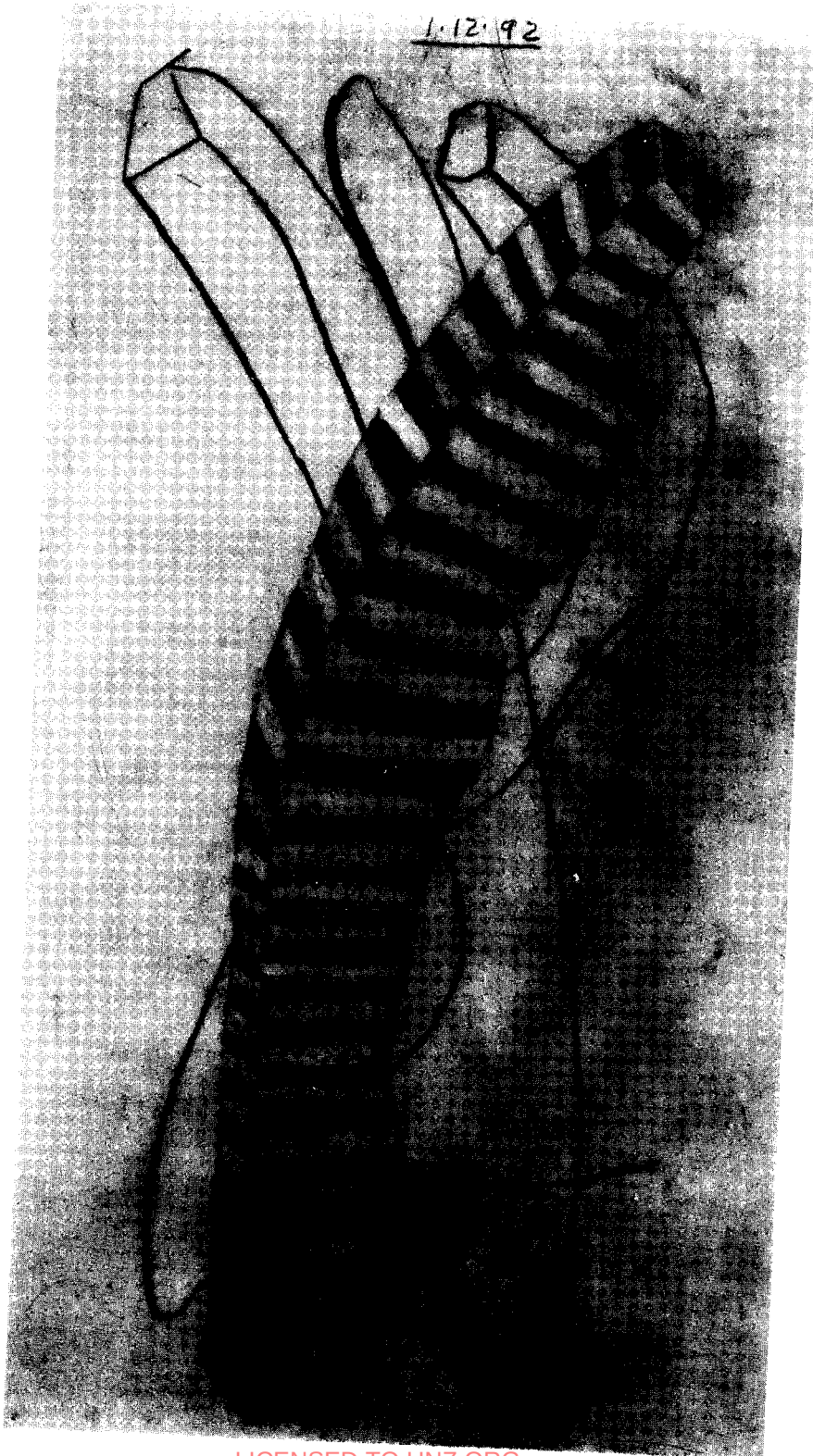

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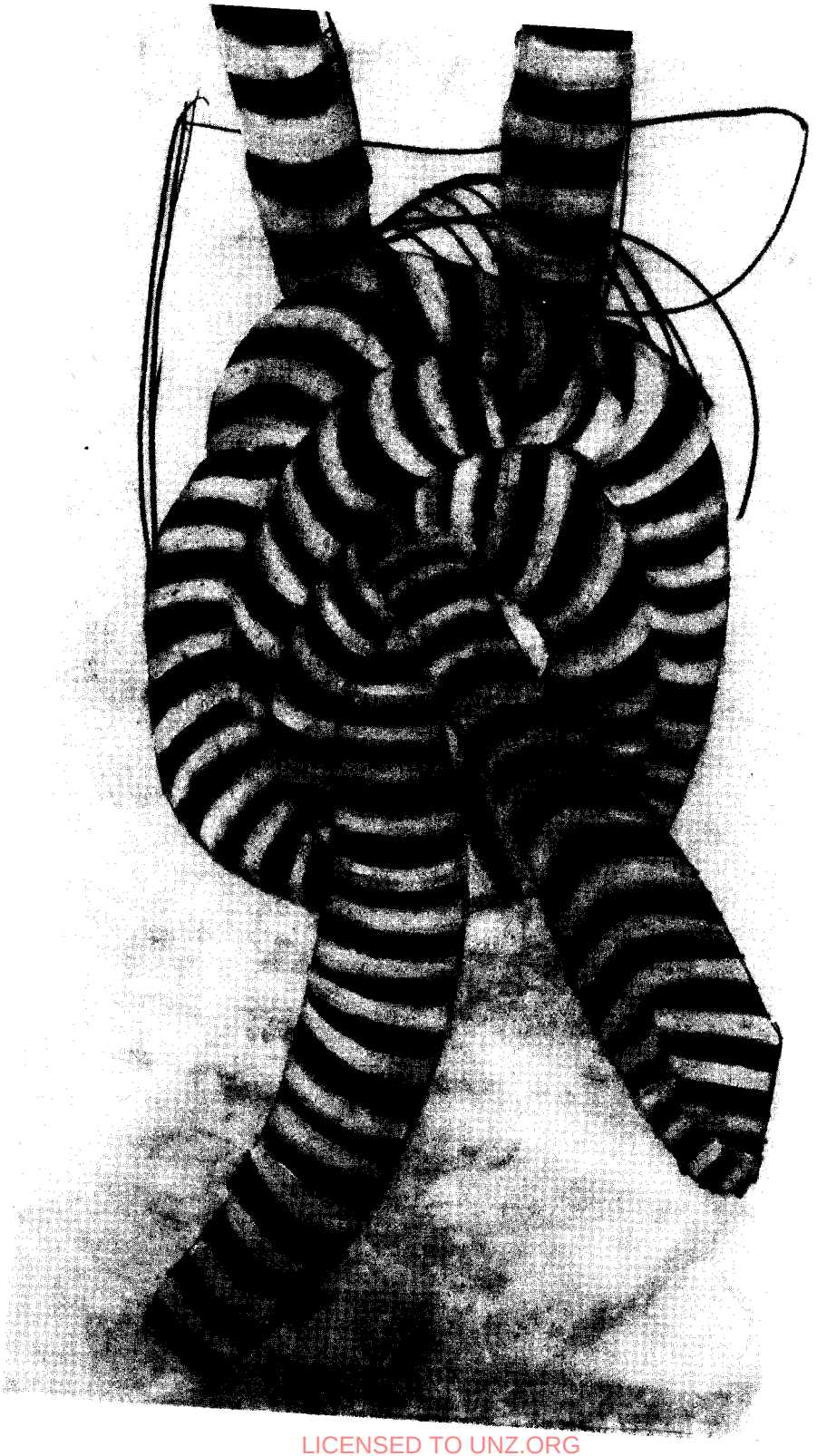

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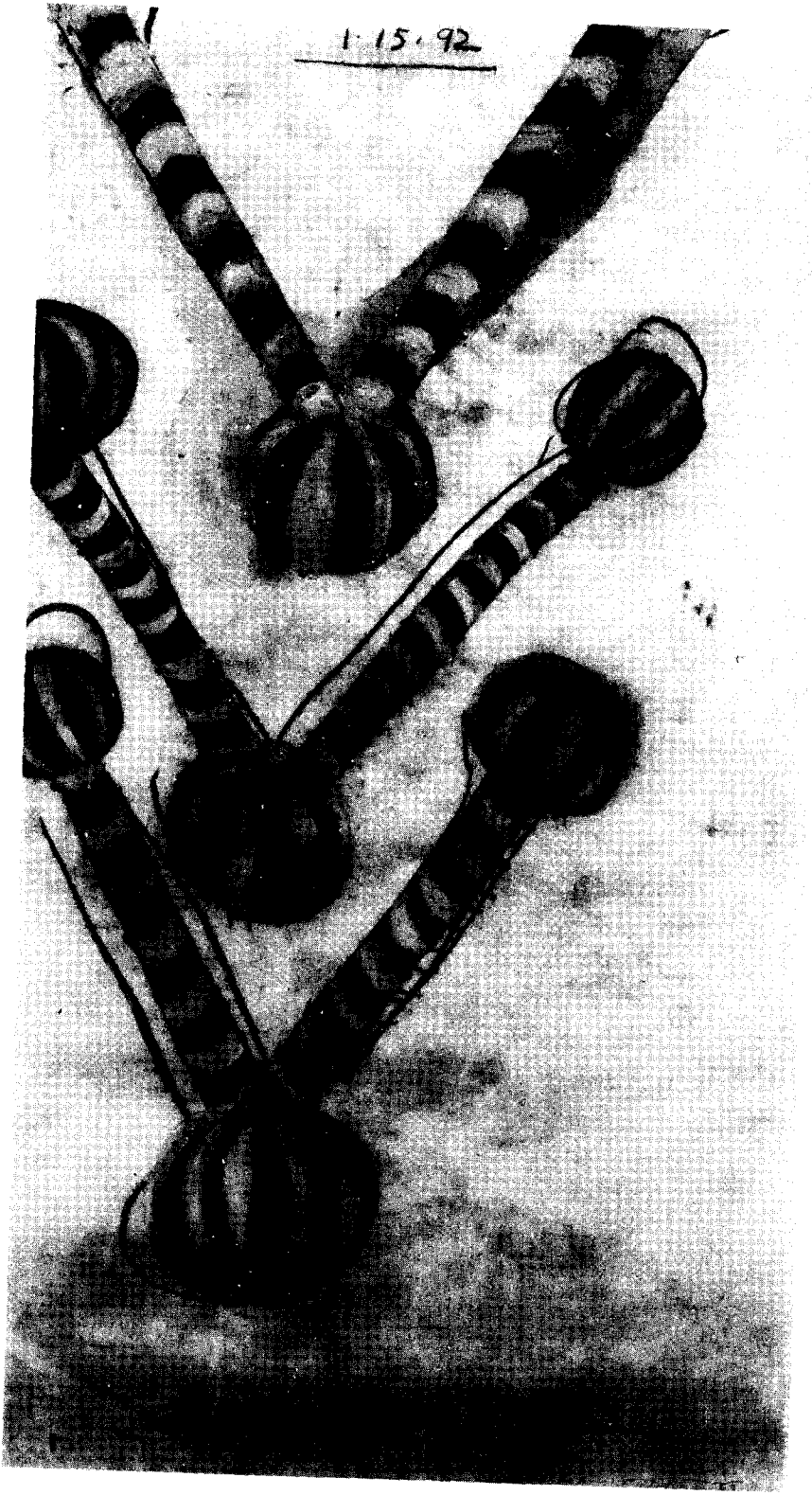

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May Swenson

Daffodildo

A daffodil from Emily's lot
I lay beside her headstone
on the first day of May.
I brought
another with me, threaded
through my buttonhole, the spawn
of ancestor she planted
where, today,
I trod her lawn.
A yellow small decanter
of her perfume, hermit-wild
and without a stopper,
next to her stone I filed
to give her back her property—
it's well it cannot spill.
Lolling on my jacket,
Emily's other daffodil.

Now, rocking to the racket
of the train, I try
recalling all her parlor's
penetration of my eye,
remembering mainly spartan
sunlight through the dimity
of the window-bay, evoking
her white-dressed anonymity.
I remember, as if spoken
in my head: "I'm
nobody! Who
are you?"
thinking

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how liked by time
she still is. It has linked
the hemlocks closer in their
hedge so that her privacy
remains. A denser lair,
in fact, than when she was alive
and looked through that bay
on the long garden
where I looked today.

Another lady is its warden
now. She smells like bread
and butter. A New England pug-
face, she's 87, may be dead
before another host of plugless
yellow daintycups
springs next spring in the grass.
(What if one white bulb still sups
sun-time that Emily's shoe passed
over?) That old
black-dressed lady told
me, "Here's where
she soaked her gowns in this square
copper boiler on hot bricks." Whiteness
takes much washing. "Oh, her chair,"
she said, suddenly sprightly,
leading me up the stair
to a blue bedroom, "Mustn't forget to
show you
that. It's stored
in a closet." She brought out
a seat for a four-
year-old, only the cane devoutly
replaced, the ladderback and
legs of cherrywood original.
"An awe came on the trinket,"
one article her hand
would have known all

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its life.
"Geneva's farthest skill,"
I pondered,
"can't put the puppet
bowing," and retrieved
an answer,

"I dwell
in Possibility—
a fairer
house than Prose." Yellow
bells in the still
air of their green room
out there
under the upstair window
mutely swung.
Shining through their cups,
her sunny ghost
passed down the rows.
"A word is dead
when it is said,
some say.
I say
it just begins to live that day."

To her headstone I walked uphill.
It stands white without arrogance
on a green plot
that is her myth-filled
lot
now. Almost blank. Relatives
shoulder her in a straight rank.
Emily, 130 years older
since you took your
little throne
when you were four,
I crane
but can never

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gain
that high chair
where you will ever
sit! Alone.

Self-confessed, and rocking
to the racket of the train,
I play back how
I picked you for my pocket,
stooped at your plain
stone.
  One gold dildo
I leave you from the host
I stole;
the other, holy,
I will keep until
it shrinks to ghost.
  "Disdaining men,
and oxygen,"
your grassy
breast I kiss
and make
this vow, Emily, to "take
vaster
attitudes—and strut upon my stem."

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Lloyd Schwartz

Pornography

1. First Couple

On his knees, his back to us: the pale honeydew melons of his
bare buttocks, the shapely, muscular hemispheres—

the voluptuous center.

His knees push into the worn plush of a velvet cushion
on the floral Oriental beside her cot.

He twists sideways—*contraposto*—and bends to put his face
into her crotch, between her limp legs,

one hoisted by his right shoulder, the other—more
like an arm—reaching around his back, her ankle
resting on his naked hip.

She's wearing shiny slippers with bows; he has on
bedroom slippers and socks.

He's got a classic profile: straight nose, sharp chin.
Cowlick. His hair tapers high on his neck,
outlines his ear, in the current fashion;
her
curly bob gives away the date (barely '20s).

His mouth grazes her private hair; lips apart, he
keeps his tongue to himself.

He's serious: if he were wearing clothes, and she were
something

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with pipes, he'd be a plumber's assistant—inspecting,
studious, intent;
nothing erotic in his look, hardly
aroused at all (a little hard to tell, of course,
from behind).

Flat on her back, on the dark, fringed spread, gravity
flattening her breasts, she looks

uncomfortable, but not unhappy. Her eyes
check out the camera. Her lips are sealed, yet—

isn't there?—a trace of smile
playing around the edges . . .

She stretches out an arm to him, places her palm
flat on his head—guiding him so lightly, she

might be blessing him.

2. Second Couple: The Sailor and His Girl

They're hot, half-dressed (upper half only), and they
can't wait.

He sports a sailor's midi and a mariner's
beret (is that a mound of fishing nets
she's lying back on?)
He rests his naked knee
beside her ample thigh.

Her dress is long—Victorian and striped. If she hadn't
raised it to her chest, it would be hiding her
black knee-length stockings and black, mannish shoes.

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(He's also wearing shoes. How did he get his
pants off?)
No underwear—
nothing fallen around her
ankles
to keep her from spreading her legs.

Not quite supine, she strains forward to eye, and
hold, his bold erection:
bat and hardballs—
major league (his Fenway Frank; his juicy
all-day-sucker).

He looks down hungrily at her hungry eyes
and mouth—one hand pressed flush against
his own naked thigh.
He slouches a little (not all of him is
standing at attention), to make what she wants
easier for her to reach.

But the photographer is sharp—he keeps his sharpest focus
on what he's sure we want it on: all the

fleshy folds, clefts, crevices—the no-longer-
secret places—of her welcoming flesh.

He knows the costumes negate the spiritual burden
(and freedom) of pure nakedness—
put us *in*
medias res (things happening, things about
to happen); in

on the guilty secret, complicit—one eye
furtively glancing over a shoulder . . .

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His models rivet their attention on each other (did he
have to tell them?), so that we can be

riveted too.

Of course, they're only posing—
but despite the props and costumes, certain

undeniable details
suggest that it isn't—it

can't be—all an act.

3. Ménage à Trois

It's the heavy one—the one with the little potbelly, sagging
breasts, and double chin (practically all we can
see of her face)—that he's kissing so passionately.

Yet his arms are around them both, he loves them both
(and of course he couldn't kiss them
both at the same time).

Naked except for (like them) shoes and stockings, and garters,
he sits at the edge of an overstuffed easy chair,
his knees spread wide,
his massive cock
rising like the Leaning Tower from his gut.

His chest and neck, calves and thighs, have an athlete's
sculptured musculature:

exercise keeps all his parts in shape.

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Both women are on their knees. She—the heavy one on his
left (*our* right)—pushes into him, her round belly
against his knee, her plush, round bottom
a luxurious counterweight.

Her fingers clutch his engorged organ, hang
on to it, almost to steady herself.

The other one is slimmer, prettier, she has a pretty
mouth—a delicate movie-star face.

She's almost crouching, practically sitting on her
own high heels; her right hand tenderly envelopes
his testicles.
Hard to tell if she's smiling
up at his face or down at his genitals—probably
both, in equal admiration, adoration, desire.

His own benign, blissed-out look is
harder to read, his shadowy profile
half-buried in the intense kiss.

There's something sweet, *humane,* about them all: not
innocent—
but nothing (well, almost nothing) hard,
or hardened yet.

Only the little they have on reminds us how
openly this was intended to be obscene.

The composition itself is elegant—balanced, symmetrical:
the sweeping curve of the pretty one's behind
and back, flowing up and across the curve of the
man's shoulders and neck,
then down again through the
fuller arcs of the plump one's back and rump—

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a harmonious circle of arms: theirs behind his back
supporting him; his around them—his hands resting
on their shoulders; their hands meeting in his lap . . .

It's like some medieval *Descent from the Cross* or *Holy*
Burial: the slumping Christ between two
ministering Angels—
but inside out, inverted, a negative
of the Passion. Passion here only—and nothing
but—passion. Perhaps

not even passion.

This ancient postcard: cracked; corners broken; edges
frayed; worn and fragile

from use.

How many has it gratified; disappointed;
hurt? In whose horny fingers has it

been gripped (and did that hand
know what the other was doing)?

Not innocent—

but nothing about them
hard, or hardened yet;

not yet past taking pleasure
in whatever pleasure they

receive, or give.

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Six Poems by Burton Raffel

The Man with a Hole in His Heart

Everyone has advice, lots of suggestions,
Some bring him plastic bowls, tin cans,
Old buckets; someone with half a degree
In something says the blood stains don't matter,
Not even the rate of flow. "It's the total volume,
It's the displacement, you see. Just the displacement.
Never mind the rest."
I don't mind,
Hell, it's not my world, who cares if it gets all bloody?
And I've been displaced before, too,
By better things than my own lousy blood.
Well, maybe I can't say I don't mind, but anyway,
I'm sure as hell used to it, by now.

Lovers Losing Lovers

Nothing in all the world is quite so lonely as a lover who wants to love but loses his beloved in a jungle the two of them helped one another create, plant by tree by vine. Nothing in all the world is so pathetic as a lover who thinks he wants to stand but always finds himself lying down, thinks he wants to speak but constantly falls silent. Nothing in all the world is so helpless as a lover lost in a jungle he has helped to make and cannot find even the edge of.

There is no escaping, either for the lover or for his beloved, when the vines have closed off the sun, when the trees have closed off the wind, when the plants have grown into a thick

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wall that no foot was ever meant to penetrate. Escape is never a possibility, anyway. The only possibility is demolition—either the jungle or themselves. They must choose. No one else can choose for them, and they cannot escape the choice. It is their choice. They will live with it forever.

I Send Letters

I send letters against their ears.
I send letters into their noses.
I send letters straight at their fears,
Their terrors. I send letters to those

Who hate me. I watch letters fall
And burn like yellow fire, then smoke
And char apart. My letters are all
I have. They think my letters a joke.

I go on sending letters in spite
Of refusals, in spite of threats: death
To this poet. Moving from darkness to light
I send my letters as I breathe my breath.

Burn my letters, but blood flames bright.
Words like crosses glow in the night.
I send letters forever. They fly.
These poems hang like stars in the sky.

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Rosamund

Rose petal, rose mouth, rose, open to humming
beaks and hairy bees, swinging warm
in sun, rose wet with inner dew,
petal by petal filled by bird nose, bee snout,
rose, rose, grown great with bloom, I pick you,
pluck you, hand you here in my hand: rose,
I plant you in her hair, hold you to her skin, she has you,
rose, once all the world's, once garden soft,
now hers, now fragrance, now blossom forever thornless,
rose petal, rose mouth, forever open, but mine.

Folk Talk

Dogs bark, say the Russians,
But wind blows it away.

Art, said the ancients, is worship
But not play.

Dark, says a child, is danger
Making mouths pray.

Start, say good men, is no ending,
But deciding to stay.

And part, as all the world knows, is not whole,
But only this day,
The single lingering way
Of this day.

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Credo

Until the lid is on the box
the box we are is open
except when it's not

which is any time that something wants in
that doesn't look like it fits:
too fat, too thin,

whatever: the shape of the box calls
the shots, and the shape is fixed
at birth, and all

we do, working with its walls, is pretend
to wait for the lid to fall.
We call that the end

but in fact we end before we start:
we are what we are: why try
to lie? The art

of living is knowing what's gone, what remains,
when walls refuse to bend
and boxes won't change.

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Curtis's Charm

Jim Carroll

I ran into my old friend Curtis yesterday, way uptown—the edges of Harlem. We'd been in a drug detox program together many years ago, long before they became fashionable and assumed the look of Ivy League campuses. We got fairly tight then . . . everyone did in those bleak surroundings.

Curtis had the same look as back then: long, straggly goatee like some Chinese astrologer, a shaved head, giving him a remarkable resemblance to the boxer Marvin Hagler (though only about half his size).

I saw Curtis coming from a block away, heading downtown on Fifth with the cranked, purposeful walk of a purposeless man. He was cutting through the humidity with rocking elbows, auto-cruising on major fear and bad crack. Dangerously bad crack, speed-laced, dearly in want of sedative grace.

He was wearing the same hat he had on at our last chance meeting six years ago—a short-billed black beanie, leather. He told me that the blue zippered jacket and dark blue baggy trousers I was wearing made me look like I was on a work detail from Riker's Island. After asking about mutual colleagues from the old days and other musings, Curtis came up square on

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me with his eyes. Serious contact. Urgent. The whites of those eyes were yellow as an old sheep's. I envied the man's teeth, however. He asked me if I was in any rush; said that he was involved in a situation that I might be able to help with. "You be just who I need talking to right now." He spoke just above a whisper.

We crossed Fifth Avenue, walked down the stairs leading into one of the secret jewels of Central Park, the Conservatory Gardens. All the flowers were blooming full, all the benches were empty. Except for a suspicious park worker grooming the curve of a hedge with huge, brutal shears, it seemed we two were alone. We took a bench near the back gate, surrounded by high rows of pink mums and surveyed the hordes of flora. I mentioned that these gardens were the place where Sam Cooke came to get into the lyrics of "Rose of Spanish Harlem" the morning before recording it.

"What ever happened to Joe Tex?" Curtis asked, by way of a non sequitur reply.

"No idea," I answered.

"See if you can find out," he said, almost as a command.

"You know," he went on, "I heard that James Brown once offered to pay for one of those sex change operations for Joe Tex, so that he could marry him as a bitch. He said he loved Joe's voice so damn much that he wanted to get down with him but not like a faggot, dig? He wanted to marry him so as all be right in God's eyes and shit. You ever hear that?"

I hadn't, but I said that I had.

Then Curtis shot me another look that said it was time to cut through the chitchat. The guy with giant shears was getting closer; the sound of his furious snipping getting loud and frightful in the silent, sweet-scented air.

Curtis is badly troubled. He's in a place where, for once, his street smarts and weaponry don't fit in nor do any good. As his tale tells, he's convinced that his new Caribbean mother-in-law, an adept at the dark tricks, is tagging him with sundry spells of heavy voodoo juju. He claims he can feel the curse infiltrating his brain like flaming arrows through his ears.

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His wife told him that because he's been seeing other women and spending the money designated for groceries and Pampers on crack, her mother is going to settle the score with various incantations and magic brews. He tells me that, right as we are speaking, there is a small brass crucible in the old hag's apartment with his name on it and with his photo and some snippings from his privates resting within.

"And any hour now," he states, pacing back and forth (nearly trampling a row of peach hibiscus), "this old bitch's gonna take something from one of them voodoo supply jars she got all over the house and toss it onto my picture in that there bowl. My wife says that if it be some kinda herbs or shit tossed in, then I be alright . . . that all it gonna do is straighten me out . . . you know, smarten up my ass and keep me in line.

"But if her moms wants to really get down to business, then she gonna take a scorpion or some other creep poison bug from them jars, and then I gonna be one sorry-ass black man, hurting like a mo'fo', and there ain't nothin'—not a damn thing—that any straight-up doctor can do."

I was shifting all over the bench during Curtis's rant. This fear was genuine, his eyes widely palpitant with it. And I knew, now that he had opened the ventilation shaft, that I was in this problem for the long haul. It wasn't the type of day one wants to spend disarming delusion either. It was only 10:30 A.M., but the grace period of cooler morning air had disappeared. The temperature was heading toward the mid-nineties again, and the humidity was conjuring steam from the garden growth. The well-tended, even lines of flora suddenly seemed more like a virgin rain forest. The sweat from Curtis's black pores flowed free from his face as the porous neurons of madness, demons and drugs fired through his mind. It seemed yellow tinted, this sweat, as if from years of orange methadone biscuits and bad cocaine cut.

"Listen," he went on. "I know what you're thinking, but I know that this woman's shit be working on me already. Like, I been doing some weird stuff lately, or better said, some weird shit's been being done to me.

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"The other week, I passed out, smoking a plain old joint, and *two days later* I woke up in some rotten homeless men's shelter in *Queen's*! In Queens, man, dig that! I ain't never been to Queens before that. Caused all sorts of problems. I missed my face-to-face down at Welfare, and they held up my digit for eight damn days. Got in trouble at the methadone clinic as well. They went and lowered my dose, so now each bottle I sell on the street be worth five dollars less than before.

"And when I get home and tell my wife what happened, and why I was gone, she tells me, all nonchalant, that I just got hold of some bad grass . . . like it had been angel-dusted or some such nonsense. But I know, goddamn it, that it was her momma at work with her evil shit.

"But all that's chump stuff compared to what came next. Worse by far is what I've been *seeing* lately. Now first of all, let me explain one thing. You see, I know my wife's been stealing money out of my trouser pockets at night after I put on my house-shorts. So I been hiding the bread the last couple of weeks. But it don't do no good, because with her powers, my wife's old lady can see where it be hid by rattling some beads and looking into this bowl of green water she got on her living room table. And she tells my wife. But even if I keep a twenty-four-hour eye on the bitch, I can't stop her from taking the money because—and don't you laugh, man, 'cause what I'm telling you be true—I saw it, and I'm counting on you to help 'cause I figure you know about weird shit, and I can't talk about this to anyone else. You see, I can't stop her from stealing my stash because now she got the powers from her momma . . . or maybe it's the old lady herself coming over at night to my apartment . . . but one of them, somehow, *knows how to change into an animal.*

"And not just one kind of animal, but any kind of animal they want to be, no fucking lie. Because three days ago, only about eight blocks from right here, I saw this squirrel jump off a tree limb from Central Park onto the sidewalk on Fifth Avenue, and I'm sure, I'm positive, that little furry mo'fo' was following me down 108th Street, all the way to Third

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Avenue, while I was scoring some dimes of rock. Now when was the last time you saw a squirrel on Third Avenue, man? And the way that little sucker was looking at me, you know, sitting up on its hind legs like they do? You wouldn't believe it, man."

I didn't, but said nothing as Curtis paused in his astonishing rap. The guy with the shears was working much too hard for a city employee in high humidity. The *swish . . . clang* was so loud that Curtis almost had to yell the last part of his story.

We both stared at the guy; he sped up his act, staring straight back at us with a sick, defiant smile. Curtis freaked. He ran over to a trash can and loaded up with three or four empty soda cans, which he proceeded to wing at the guy in rapid succession. "He's one of them, man," Curtis yelled over to me as he continued to fling aluminium. "He works for the old lady."

I grabbed Curtis while the besieged gardener ducked out of sight behind a hedge and led him out the back gate. We ran up a hill and over some rocks, finally collapsing in totally out-of-shape exhaustion on a grass patch beside a secluded path.

"Sorry, man," Curtis spoke in half-breaths. "It was just that I didn't like the way he smiled. It was evil."

"I think he was a cop, Curtis," my voice flared up. "He probably just thought we were getting high. You got to control yourself."

"You're most likely right," Curtis looked up, all settled in a crouch position now, wanting back my full attention. "Well, fuck that dude anyway . . . where was I?"

"You were being spied on, while purchasing drugs, by a squirrel," I answered.

"Right, but that was only the start." He took a look around, then continued.

"Last night was much stranger. Listen here, last night I was sitting at home in my good chair, feet up, watching a cowboy movie, and what do I see? On a Bible, now, I'm swearing to this: right in my living room come this little black mouse—

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a shade of black the same as my wife, come to think of it—moving across the floor right beside the wall, *with a ten-dollar bill in its mouth*!

"It was stopping after evey ten feet or so, looking around all sneaky, just like a thief . . . *with a ten-dollar bill in its mouth, man.* And it was coming straight from the direction of the loose plastic brick at the bottom of the phony fireplace where I been hiding my money. I looked over at the brick and could tell it had been moved just a tiny crack.

"So I got up to chase the little mo'fo', and it splits around the corner, then right under the bedroom door. I fling the door open, and it's gone, nowhere in sight, and my wife is just laid out on the bed, all naked and chilled, with a big shit-eating grin on her face. I know she had that ten-dollar bill stashed somewhere, and I know the only reason she be naked was because she'd just changed back from being the mouse and didn't have no time yet to put something on.

"So you tell me, man, can her momma, or anyone, have the power to change someone into a mouse or a squirrel? You tell me, 'cause if the old bitch can do that, then I know any curse she wants to put on me is gonna work, and my butt be burning."

Curtis looked up at me. The expression on his face was like that of an onlooker at a lynching in some gray turn-of-the-century photograph. I knew now that my old friend Curtis's fears were, in his mind, very real and, if anything, had become a perfect ally for the mother's sympathetic magic, real or imagined.

He asked again if I thought such powers of transmutation possible . . . if I'd read about that and these voodoo spells and curses. I told him how shape-shifting was big in the Middle Ages but had pretty much petered out as of late. I assured him that, even if her credentials were genuine, it was not likely his mother-in-law could turn his wife into either mouse or squirrel. Then I explained what I knew regarding homeopathic magic, breaking it down into its sub-sections of contagious and sympathetic magic. This was all pretty much out

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of *The Golden Bough*, and I realized halfway through it was a bit too academic for Curtis's benefit, under the circumstances. He just wanted to know if the old lady's curses were going to work, and, that being the case, what he could do in self-defense.

"See, that's just the point," I spoke up. "The worst thing you can do about any of this black magic shit is let yourself believe it works and that you got no defense against it. Once you let that notion inside your head, then you're just gonna get paranoid and help it along. It's like they plant this seed of self-destruction inside you, and your sense of helplessness just waters the thing. The thing to do is think righteously and purify yourself. Then any curse aimed at you will be thrown back off you and returned to the sender, working against her seven times stronger than when it was sent."

"How am I supposed to purify myself at this point, man? I mean, we're like two germs talking to each other."

He had a point, though I took umbrage at Curtis classifying me on an equal basis of "germ" as himself. I convinced him that I had made great strides, since we first knew each other as drug-infested microbes, toward purifying myself . . . at least to the degree where I could deal efficaciously against the forces of evil he had incurred.

Whether or not this claim had any validity was irrelevant, and my reasons for putting the idea forth were not as petty as they might at first seem. The fact is, I had come up with a *plan*, and one of its essential aspects was gaining my man Curtis's unswerving belief that I had the power to carry it through.

The situation was clear. I had no chance of assuaging Curtis's terror by any psycho-babble pep talks. He wasn't buying that shit, and who could blame him? He'd been tailed by a squirrel and had stood by helplessly as an Afro-mouse, who was his wife, raided his stash and made off with a ten-dollar bill.

I was gonna fight Curtis's battle on a fire versus fire, or magic versus magic, basis. I'd match her spell for spell. In my sudden enthusiasm, I blocked out the possibility that his

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adversary might be horribly genuine, that my face, name and address might be at this moment showing up clearly on the surface of her bowl of green water. *And what about* the dude with the loud gardening shears? Like I said before: no city worker works that fastidiously in that much heat.

No matter. I had, if not exactly purity, then stupidity and good intentions on my side. And a plan.

I took out my mini-notepad and ripped out a blank page. I held it up in front of Curtis's face, that same strange sweat just moaning from his pores.

"Now can we take care of business, man. Putting aside all the bullshit of why and how, what you need is some magic of your own . . . some sort of protective charm or talisman to block out this insinuating evil and neutralize it for good."

"That be exactly what I need!" Curtis perked up. "That's what I wanted all along, but can you do it?"

"Can I do it?" I sneered, my tone rebuking him for his doubts. "Of course, I can do it. Man, you got to trust me." My main mission, at this point, was instilling total belief in the spiritual sleight of hand which I was winging.

"I've got a spell to match anything the dark force can toss your way, proven and powerful. I picked it up from this great holy man on the island of Cyprus. They call him the Magus of Strovolos.

Curtis was visibly impressed by this arcane-sounding appellation. I had his attention and complete confidence. Actually, the Magus does indeed exist, as does the prescription for protection I was about to lay on Curtis. As for how legitimate its powers were, I could not really say since I'd only read about it in a book about the holy man. Certainly, it had the simplicity, precision and elegance of a prayer—quite genuine, to both the heart and the mind. Naturally, whether I possessed any semblance of the purity of spirit essential to performing the task was another matter altogether.

I bent down on one knee and laid my note paper across a day-old *New York Post* left on the ground. I realized the moment I first laid my felt tip down that I must have had

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more faith in the Magus than I realized, because I suddenly felt overwhelmed by a sense of blasphemy. Referring again to what I'd read in *The Magus of Strovolos*, I shut my eyes and pictured a ball of white light unwinding from my hand and surrounding my entire body. Still I heard the tiny voice in my head repeating the phrase: "You kidding me?"

I looked up at Curtis. I was now really pissed off that he had dragged me into this shit.

But I'd waved the blank paper as a promise in his face, and I had to deliver. In his frame of mind, my throat was slit for certain if I didn't. I began forming the lines on the paper. First symbol was the Star of David, centered in the bottom half of the page. Then around it I drew four small crosses: north, south, east, west. Beneath each cross I printed the names of the four hierarchical archangels: Michael, Raphael, Uriel and Gabriel. I confess that there was a specific clockwise order to these names—corresponding, I believe, to the four elements as well as the compass points—but I couldn't remember who went where, so I began with Michael on top and then continued randomly from there. That was the bottom half of the charm. It was sort of a preparatory incantation . . . a sort of spirit battery. I held it up to Curtis. "This is the source of power. Now, above it, we address the evil that's challenging you."

I began on the upper half; Curtis scoping in tightly over my shoulder. The first designation here was a snake. Up until now, everything was straight lines and letters, but this required some slight ability of basic draftsmanship, a gift that I have never possessed. Nevertheless, I got on with it, and the results seemed satisfactory enough to me. As I lifted the pen a moment, however, Curtis snatched the paper up and held it between us, hand trembling.

"What you doing drawing a picture of *a dick*, man?" he exclaimed vehemently. "I thought this be good magic . . . holy and good."

"That's a snake, not a damn dick," I sighed, lifting the paper out of his hand. "Here, let me fix it up a bit."

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I embellished some rings around my snake rendering, then added a rattle on its tail and a long forked tongue darting all nasty from its mouth. I held it up again for Curtis's perusal.

"Still looks more like a dick than a snake," Curtis went on, "Just got a fork coming out its tip now."

"Listen, man, it's just *a symbol*, you know," I shot back, peeved, "I ain't no photo-realist, okay? Besides, maybe that's what your dick looks like, but not mine."

I was down to the last sign. I drew a bolt of lightning, which started from the very top of the page and passed right through the snake's neck. It continued on to mid-page and ended. A righteous zapping of the serpentine evil archetypes by the celestial hierarchies.

I had Curtis sign the spell in the bottom corner, then I folded it in a series of elaborate angles. It was supposed to wind up as a neat, tiny pyramid of paper, but it came out more like a prehensile trapezoid. No matter, it was close enough. Curtis acceped it with a reverence and relief. "Now I got the mojo," he exclaimed, placing it in his pocket.

"Don't flaunt it, Curtis," I told him. "By the way, according to the Magus, you have to take it to church and sprinkle a little holy water over it. It's important . . . any Catholic church carries the stuff."

Whatever the real potency of the Magus's diagram, its effect on Curtis was exactly what I'd hoped for. His faith in the folded charm was absolute; his hands kept carressing the pocket that held it. I was wiped out . . . wanted to get away from there and soak my brain into something fresh and forgetful.

We came out of the park at 98th Street and Fifth Avenue. Curtis split uptown, turning around every twenty feet or so with some gesture of thanks. I stood watching him a short while, then headed down 98th Street over to Madison to pick up a paper.

Finally free of Curtis's presence and concerns, I was swamped with speedily vacillating thoughts and feelings during this one block walk: the power of evil, the power of goodness, the extent of a joke's success. What if I was feeling some legitimate

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sense of faith, no matter how disarrayed? There was nothing wrong with that. The small voice again: "You kidding me?"

I reached the corner, fairly much neutralizing these rival, racing thoughts, which had all pulled up lame far before reaching the finish line.

"But this rough magic I here abjure . . . "

I paid for the paper in one of those Korean combination newspaper and tobacco–stationery–groceries–small-notions–and–salad-bar stores on the corner of Madison. What I saw as I exited just froze me in place. It felt like someone had smashed something rare and made of blown glass inside my brain. I did my first Manhattan double take in about fifteen years.

Lying right there on the sidewalk, busy with lunchtime staffers from Mt. Sinai Hospital, was a snake. It was dead, of course, and only about nine inches long, but there it was. And how long could it have been there? Certainly no fastidious, eagle-eyed Korean merchant with a staff of fourteen relatives would allow a dead snake to linger very long right in front of his establishment.

Question: when was the last time you saw a snake in Manhattan? I grew up here, and I've never before seen a snake on a sidewalk, not in any borough (including Staten Island). I've never seen one in a park either. In all my years walking New York City, this was the first snake I'd seen.

At this point I'm not buying any notion of coincidence: snake in Magus's instructions, snake in drawing, snake on sidewalk one block away.

I moved over and checked closer. Once again the glass rattled in my brain as I saw how it had been killed. Its body had been severed right at the neck . . . only a few strands of fiber and sinew held the head together with the remainder of its body: body of snake on sidewalk one block away sliced straight at neck . . . body of snake in tailsman pierced at neck by lightning bolt of occult elemental righteousness. "You kidding me?"

I started to act hyper and strange. I wanted to catch up

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to Curtis and let him see this scene for himself. I needed corroboration. Apparently, I began thinking, I possess powers of some elect few, great gifts from the noetic realms. There could be money in it. I eyed an empty storefront across the street. I needed Curtis as witness, to pass the word on to others.

I grabbed a Korean stacking newspapers in front of the store, "Don't let anything happen to that snake . . . do you understand me? I'll be right back?" He pulled away and ran inside. "Screw it," I yelled, running over and swiping up the filthy reptile from the sidewalk. I held it at arms length before me with both hands, the head in one, the body in the other. It was essential the two sections didn't come apart now.

I ran this way up to Fifth Avenue until 103rd Street, fingers pointing at me from every direction. Finally, I realized there was no way I was going to find Curtis. Also, complete exhaustion from my run had sobered me considerably. I was a man holding a dead snake on a busy street lined with buses and their gawking passengers.

I went a few feet to the park wall and tossed the snake beneath a bush, once again abjuring the rough magic. If I did have a staff, however, I would neither break nor bury it, and as for the Magus books, I had no intention of drowning them.

UPDATE: It's been two months now since my adventure with Curtis in Central Park. I've been trying to find him, both to fill him in on the subsequent events of that strange day and to find out what his present situation is. I've had no success, however, and don't imagine I will. According to a mutual friend I saw two nights ago, Curtis has been seen by no one, having, a month before, fled the jurisdiction of New York City authorities and a charge of burning out the guts of the entire building in which his wife was, along with her mother, residing. Fortunately, nobody was injured in the blaze, though the mother-in-law's irreplaceable collection of Caribbean esoterica, as well as a small menagerie of reptiles, rodents and

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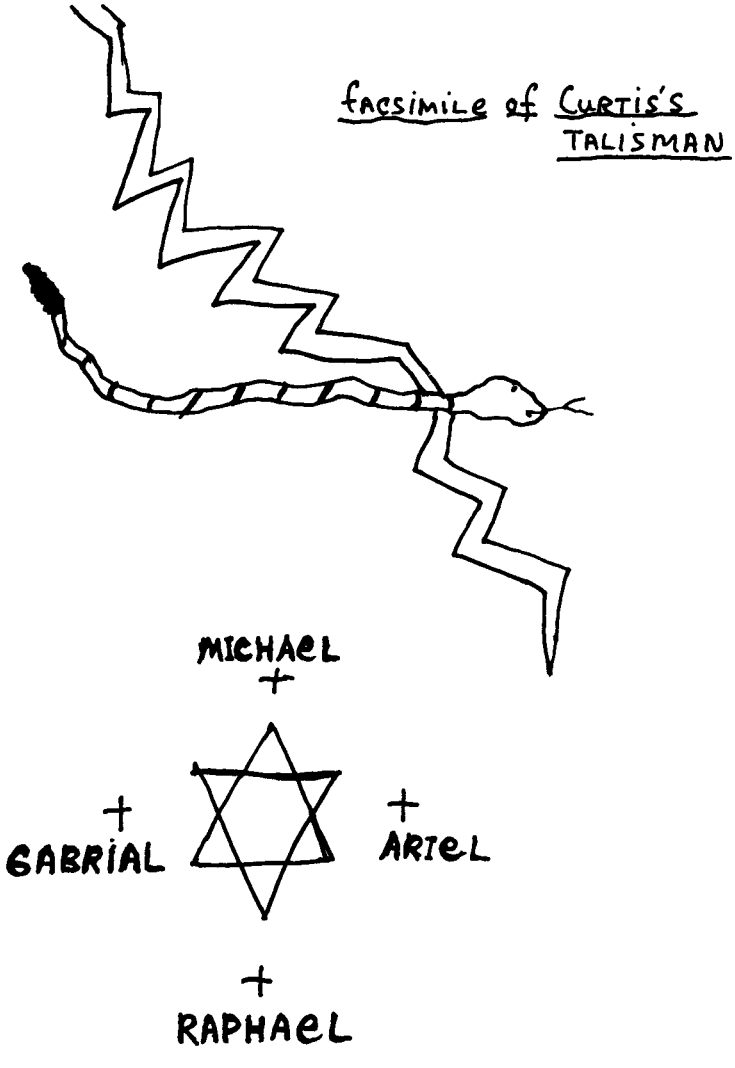
insects, was completely destroyed. Whether Curtis ever took the time and effort to locate the presecribed holy water and sprinkle it on the tailsman I cannot say. But I, for one, would like to know the answer.



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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Donald Antrim lives in Brooklyn, New York. *Elect Mr. Robinson for a Better World*, which will be published by Viking in the Fall, is his first novel.

Jim Carroll's books include *The Basketball Diaries*, *Forced Entries* and *Living at the Movies*. He lives in New York City.

Ralph Lombreglia is the author of two collections of short stories, *Men under Water*, and *Make Me Work*, forthcoming from Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Melissa Pritchard received the Flannery O'Connor Award for her first collection of stories, *Spirit Seizures*. She is also the author of a novel, *Phoenix*, and teaches creative writing at Arizona State University.

Jim Shepard is the author of four novels, *Flights*, *Paper Doll*, *Lights Out in the Reptile House* and *Kiss of the Wolf*, forthcoming from Harcourt Brace & Company. His short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*. He teaches English at Williams College.

POETRY

A.R. Ammons received the 1992 Lannan Poetry award. His most recent collection, *Garbage*, is forthcoming from W.W. Norton.

David Bergman was awarded the George Elliston prize for his poem "Cracking the Code." His latest book is *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-representation in America*. He teaches at Towson State University.

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Judith Berke lives in Miami Beach, Florida. She has written a poetry collection, *White Morning*, and a chapbook, *Acting Problems*, forthcoming from Silverfish Review Press.

Rafael Campo is an intern in the Department of Internal Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco and was the George Starbuck Fellow in Poetry at Boston University in 1990 and 1991. Recent work has appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Ploughshares* and *The Kenyon Review*.

Nicholas Christopher is the author of five books of poems including, most recently, *In the Year of the Comet* and *5°*, forthcoming from Viking Penguin. He is the author of a novel, *The Soloist*, and he edited the anthologies *Under 35: The New Generation of American Poets* and *Walk on the Wild Side: Contemporary Urban American Poetry*, forthcoming from Scribner's/Collier. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry for 1993–94.

Nancy Eimers received a 1989 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has written a poetry collection, *Destroying Angel*, and she teaches in the MFA program at Western Michigan University.

Irving Feldman's most recent book of poetry is *All of Us Here*. He is a recipient of a 1992 MacArthur Fellowship and teaches in the English department at SUNY Buffalo.

Donald Finkel's most recent books are *The Wake of the Electron*, *Selected Shorter Poems* and an anthology of contemporary Chinese poetry, *A Splintered Mirror*. He is the co-translator of a collection of poems, *Corridor*, by Chinese poet Bei Dao, forthcoming from New Directions and Anvil Press.

Robert Hahn is the author of three volumes of poetry, most recently *One More Time*. His poems appeared in *The Southwest Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Western Humanities Review* and *The New Republic*. He lives in Vermont where he is president of Johnson State College.

Paul Kane's first book of poems is *The Further Shore*. The poetry editor for *Antipodes*, a North American journal of Australian literature, he teaches at Vassar College and lives in Warwick, New York.

Cynthia Kraman's three books of poetry are *Taking on the Local Color*, *Club 82* and *The Mexican Mural*. Her fiction has appeared in *The Southern Review*. She lives in New York City and teaches at the College of New Rochelle.

David Lehman's most recent book of poems is *Operation Memory*. He is also the author of *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul De Man* and *The Line Forms Here*. In 1992 he received a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award.

Sandra McPherson's most recent collection of poems is *The God of Interdeterminacy*. She teaches at the University of California at Davis.

Christopher Merrill is the author of *From Far Away the Nearby: Georgia O'Keeffe as Icon* and *The Grass of Another Country* as well as two collections of poetry.

Lynn Powell's poems have appeared in the *Carolina Quarterly*, *Zone Three*

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and *West Branch*. She is a native of east Tennessee and now lives in Oberlin, Ohio.

Burton Raffel's most recent book of poetry is *Man as a Social Animal*. He is the translator of the New American Library edition of *Beowulf*, and his translations of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* won the French-American Foundation Translation Prize for 1990. He has just completed a new translation of *Don Quixote*, forthcoming from Bantam.

Lloyd Schwartz is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts and a classical-music editor and radio commentator. He has written two collections of poetry, *Goodnight Gracie* and *These People*, and his poems have been anthologized in both the *Pushcart Prize (XII)* and *Best American Poetry 1991*.

Shawn Sturgeon's poetry has been published in *The New Republic* and *The Western Humanities Review*. He lives in Cincinnati, Ohio.

May Swenson died on December 4th, 1989. "Daffidildo" was one among the many poems and stories left unpublished at the time of her death.

FEATURES

James Linville is the managing editor of *The Paris Review*. Interviews he has conducted have appeared previously in the magazine, and his work has been reprinted in *Harper's* and the *Pushcart Prize* anthology. He has just completed a novel entitled *Time Between Stations*.

Erwin Pfrang was born in Munich in 1951. He lives and works in Val d'Orcia, Italy.

George Plimpton is the editor of *The Paris Review*. His most recent book is *Very Special Artists: Chronicles of Courage*, co-authored with Jean Kennedy Smith.

INTERVIEWS

Shusha Guppy *(Christopher Logue Interview)* is the London editor of *The Paris Review*. A collection of her interviews, *Looking Back*, was published by Paris Review Editions, in 1991.

Edward Hirsch *(James Salter Interview)* teaches at the University of Houston and has written three books of poems: *For the Sleepwalkers*, *Wild Gratitude* and *The Night Parade*.

ART

Peter Campus was born in New York in 1937 and lives in New York. His videos, installations and photographs have been shown at the Musée

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National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris: MIT Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts: and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.
Roberto Juarez was born in Chicago in 1952 and lives in New York and Miami Beach. His paintings and drawings have been exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Center for the Fine Arts, Miami; and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
Lari Pittman was born in Los Angeles in 1952 and lives in Los Angeles. Recent exhibitions of his paintings and drawings have been held at Jay Gorney Modern Art, New York; Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles; and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.
Gary Simmons was born in 1964 and lives in New York. His work has been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa Monica; and Simon Watson, New York.

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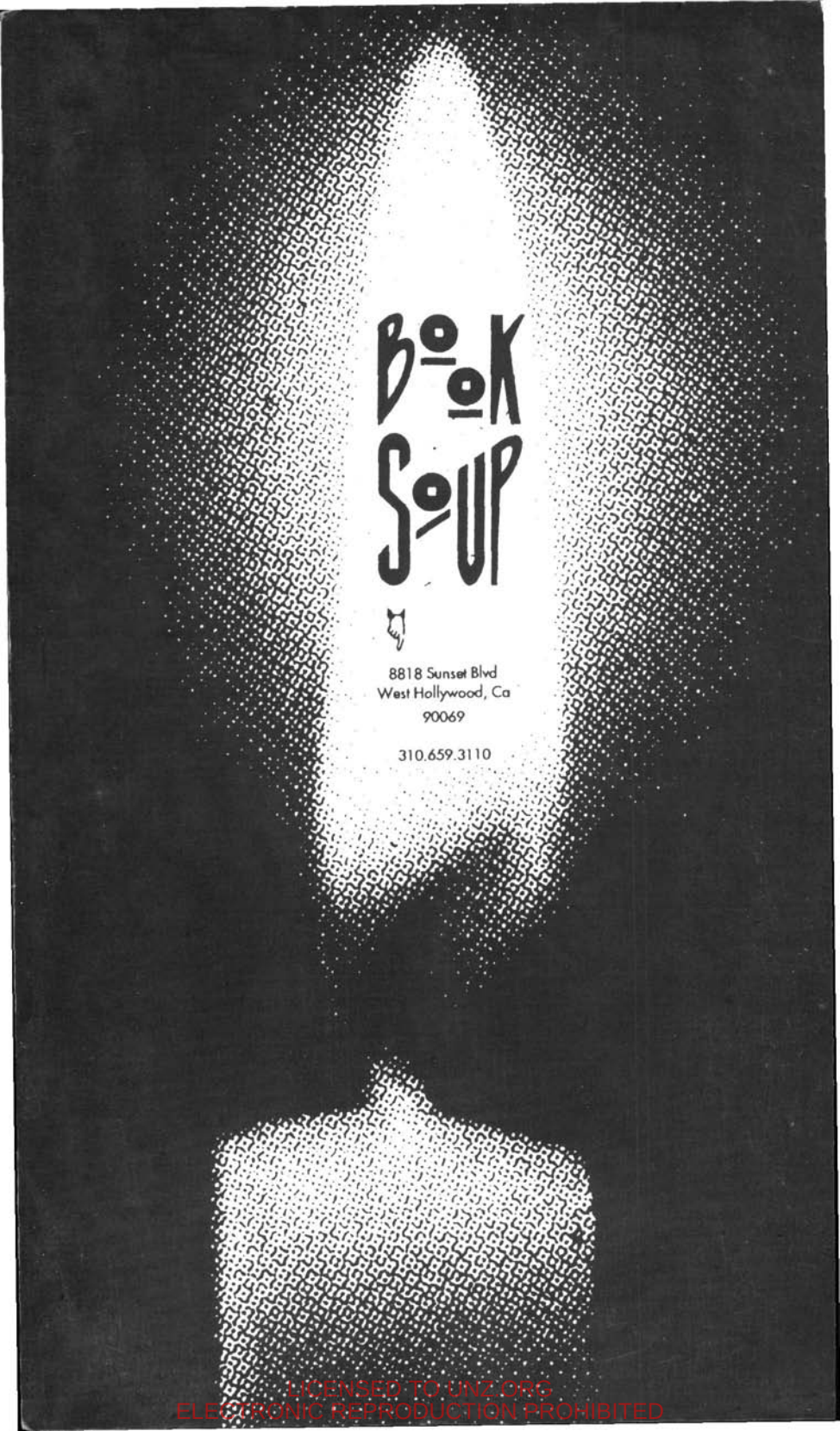

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